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Biblical Interpretation and African Traditional Religion

*Cross-Cultural and Community Readings in
Owamboland, Namibia*

By

Helen C. John



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The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available online at <http://catalog.loc.gov>
LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2019012519>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 0928-0731

ISBN 978-90-04-39930-3 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-39931-0 (e-book)

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Abbreviations

ABS	African Biblical Studies
ATR	African Traditional Religion
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBS	Contextual Bible Study
CCBIG(s)	Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Group(s)
ELCIN	The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia
ELOC	The Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church
GNT English	The Holy Bible, Good News Translation in English
GNT <i>Oshindonga</i>	<i>Ombiimbeli Ondjapuki</i> (The Holy Bible), Good News Translation in <i>Oshindonga</i>
NRSV	The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SPCK	Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge

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Acknowledgments

The doctoral research upon which this book is based was generously supported by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. I would like to thank the AHRC and my doctoral supervisors – Professors Louise J. Lawrence and David G. Horrell at the University of Exeter – for their support and guidance.

Thanks also go to my family and friends – their encouragement gave me the courage and confidence to embark on the project and the stamina to complete it. Not least of them is Lucia Namushinga, who invited me to Iihongo all those years ago and made the fieldwork possible. My heartfelt gratitude goes to the Iihongo community as a whole for the numerous ways in which they helped me, got involved in the project, and for their friendship. Likewise, to Reverend Thomas Uushona – I could not have hoped for a better translator and collaborator in the group sessions than you!

This book is dedicated to my 'second family' – to Kuku Maria, Kuku Laban, Nekulu, Monika, Klaudia and Asser – whose hospitality and welcome knows no bounds. For making me a part of your world and for looking after me as one of your own, I am truly grateful – tangi unene!

Introduction

This book seeks to contribute to the ‘nascent discipline’ of African Biblical Studies (Mbuvi 2017: 149). African Biblical Studies (hereafter, ABS) has been described as ‘richly textured’ (West 2018: 241), ‘innovative’ and ‘reactionary’ (Mbuvi 2017: 149). Its rich texture originates not only from the variety of cultural and post-colonial contexts from which it emanates but also from its innate interdisciplinarity (Mbuvi 2017: 154). Its innovation lies in its drive to move beyond the parameters, foci and methodologies of Euro-American biblical studies. It is reactionary in that it responds to and critiques ‘the inadequacy of western biblical studies in providing meaningful responses to concerns that are pertinent to African communities’ (Mbuvi 2017: 149).¹ In short, ABS aims to carve out ‘an Afrocentric approach’ and deliver ‘Afrocentric interpretation’ (Dube 2012: 12 and 18).

This Afrocentricity has many facets, but all speak to the fact that African biblical interpretation is, as Justin S. Ukpong has described it, ‘an encounter between the Biblical text and the African context’ (Dube and West 2000: 11, cited in Mbuvi 2017: 152). This encounter may take the form of biblical interpretation with or through the ‘culture and/as religion of Africans’ (West 2018: 247; see also Dube 2012: 6). African biblical interpretation prioritises the present realities and concerns of African communities and may also engage ‘ordinary readers’ from those communities in the process of interpretation (Mbuvi 2017: 153–4; this study uses the term ‘grassroots interpreters’).

Pertinent to my location as a European – I am a white, British, middle-class woman and an atheist – is Andrew M. Mbuvi’s question of whether a non-African can ‘do African biblical interpretation’. He concludes as follows:

Should a writing by a non-African that engages a certain aspect of African reality as a means of interpreting a biblical passage be identified as African biblical interpretation? Ukpong (1999: 2) has rightly maintained

1 The terms ‘African’ and ‘Western’ are, of course, problematic generalisations. They function usefully in this study to illustrate a generalised opposition between African and Western worldviews and hermeneutical approaches, but I do not intend to communicate the sense that they are homogenous categories. ‘Western’ is used to point to the Eurocentric inflection and Euro-American scholarly profiles that dominate biblical scholarship. Eurocentric scholarship is only beginning to acknowledge that its many of its perspectives are rooted in post-Enlightenment, post-industrial, demythologised and scientistic understandings of ‘rationality’ and a desire for (unattainable) ‘objectivity’. That is not to say that *all* Western scholarship is thoroughly Eurocentric.

that the incorporation of African elements into the historical and literary readings of the Bible is what allows for African biblical interpretation to arrive at distinct conclusions from those made by western counterparts on the same texts. In this regard, then, it would seem that it is the African content that determines whether a writing is engaging in African biblical interpretation.

MBUVI 2017: 155

The 'African content' of the present work has multiple aspects. The Ondonga kingdom in the Owambo region of northern Namibia is the focus of the study, an area that I have been visiting for over twenty years. Grassroots interpreters from an Ondonga village (Iihongo) participated in biblical interpretation groups, the results of which form the backbone of the study. Additionally, the localised form of African Traditional Religion (hereafter, ATR; referred to by the participants as 'Ndonga culture': *omuthigululwakalo gwaaNdonga*) operates throughout the study as a lens through which the selected New Testament texts are interpreted. The grassroots interpreters were asked to compare and contrast aspects of their cultural context with themes arising in the biblical texts upon which we reflected. For my part, I undertook a survey of the ethnographic literature on the region in order to contextualise further the grassroots interpretations. This study is therefore cultural in orientation, with the 'African context' operating as both '*resource* for biblical interpretation' and '*subject* of biblical interpretation' (Ukpong 2000: 12, cited in West 2018: 242–3). ATR and ethnographic contextualisation operate as lenses and community participants are my interpretative partners.

1 Indigenous Traditions and Christianity in Owamboland: Encounters and Interactions in a Post-colonial Context

As Gerald West has stated, 'doing biblical scholarship in African post-colonies is, by definition, to do post-colonial biblical interpretation' (2018: 246). Namibia is one such post-colonial context. Like so many others, it was 'penetrated by the West' in the Scramble for Africa – it was a victim of what Musa Dube has powerfully described as 'a gang rape' (Dube 2012: 2 and 3). Namibia endured colonial violence on multiple occasions and from multiple aggressors: Great Britain (occupation of Walvis Bay, 1878–1922), Germany (1884–1918) and South Africa (1918–1990).

The Aawambo (Owambo people) are one of eleven officially recognised ethnic groups in Namibia. The Owambo region lies on the Cuvelai floodplain in

the north of the country, with the kingdom of Ondonga at its south-eastern reaches.² This floodplain extends northwards from the Etosha salt pan (now within the Etosha National Park) up to the border with Angola (and beyond). Missionary and colonial powers knew the area as 'Owamboland' and the South African authorities designated it a homeland, or 'Native Reserve', in line with the apartheid policies operational in South Africa (and Namibia, then known as South West Africa) after the Second World War. Although this area is still known as 'Owamboland' and referred to as such by many, the politically and ethnically neutral referents 'The North', 'north-central Namibia' or 'northern Namibia' are also commonly used. These terms have been in place since Namibia achieved independence from South Africa in 1990.

I refer here to the area as Owamboland in order to distinguish clearly Owambo territory of the (central) north from the Kaokoveld in the north-west and the Kavango and Zambezi (the latter being previously known as the Caprivi) regions in the north-east. Historically, Aawambo territory was, of course, not limited by international boundaries and thus extends beyond the Namibia-Angola border, just north of Oshikango. (Namibian) Owamboland is comprised of eight historical kingdoms of *Oshiwambo*-speakers, of which

2 The main period of fieldwork for this study took place between 17th November 2013 and 15th September 2014 in Iihongo, a small village located approximately 25 kilometres south-east of Ondangwa (the central town in Ondonga). Ondangwa is roughly 680 kilometres north of Windhoek, Namibia's capital city.

The Aandonga reside in the Ondonga region and speak *Oshindonga*, one of the *Oshiwambo* languages. In many areas of Owamboland, Ondonga amongst them, traditional authorities (headed by chiefs or kings) co-exist alongside regional and centralised administrative systems of governance. It is thus still relevant to speak of Ondonga as a kingdom. The Ndonga and (geographically proximate) Kwanyama populations are the largest sub-groups of the Aawambo. However, given the relative lack of literature on Namibia, and especially on the Aawambo, works will be consulted here that have focused on the Aawambo more widely – those beyond Ondonga and those beyond Namibia's borders. I have made the conscious choice to follow the terminology recommended to me by my Ndonga friend, Lucia Namushinga, in whose home village I conduct my fieldwork. This is also the terminology used by most recent studies on the Aawambo and, most significantly, by scholars from the region. The most frequently used general terms are given here (further specialist terms are glossed in the main text):

Owamboland:	Owambo region of northern Namibia.
Oshiwambo:	Wambo language, Wambo thing(s).
Aawambo/Wambo:	People/Person from Owamboland. (plural prefix: aa-).
Ondonga:	South-eastern kingdom in Owamboland.
Oshindonga:	Ndonga language, Ndonga thing(s).
Aandonga/Omundonga:	People/Person from Ondonga.

Ondonga is the most south-easterly and was the first to be accessed by the Finnish missionaries arriving in 1870.³

Since 1870, the Ondonga region has been significantly influenced by the arrival of Christianity. Moves to Christianise Ondonga were first (and most successfully) undertaken by the Finnish Missionary Society. Their lasting influence endures, subsequent to the initial encounters, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (hereafter, ELCIN), albeit independent since 1954. As in so many other locations, with the arrival of the missionaries came the 'systemic erosion and exorcising of African cultural and religious reality' (Mbuvi 2017: 159). The majority of local (Ndonga) cultural worldviews and practices were deemed by the missionaries to compromise Christianity (*uukristi*).

This 'African religio-culture reality', notes Mbuvi, is prioritised in ABS (Mbuvi 2017: 151). To prioritise African cultural-religious worldviews (ATR) acknowledges that ATR persists and intermingles with Christianity in African contexts. The enduring significance of ATR in Owambo contexts, however, has not always been universally acknowledged. Studies of Owambo worldviews (in the majority, regional studies and those authored by missionary ethnographers) suggest that autochthonous⁴ cultural-religious beliefs and practices are no longer in evidence amongst Owambo Christians. Owamboland is frequently presented as having experienced a neat cleavage with its cultural-religious past, with emphasis laid on the high level of success that the missionaries had in deliberately eliminating Owambo culture. Particularist studies – often those focusing topics that a Westerner might consider to be 'non-religious' – more often index the complexity that African biblical scholars might expect regarding the interactions between autochthonous and 'immigrant' worldviews (ATR and Christianity). A few examples will serve to illustrate this tension.

Teddy Aarni's (1982) study of the Owambo (alternative spelling: Ovambo) religious worldview claims that 'sources like interviews and field research amongst the Ovambos are of little use today, since most Ovambos are now Christians. The few non-Christians who exist in Ovamboland are unwilling to disclose any knowledge of e.g. the old Kalunga [Owambo Supreme Being] concept to an outsider' (1982: 9–10). Aarni generalises in his suggestion that there is a homogeneous belief system shared by a whole population. Questionable

3 The region is now divided into four administrative districts: Omusati, Oshana, Ohangwena and Oshikoto. The Ondonga kingdom has been subsumed into the Oshikoto region.

4 This term is preferred throughout this book in place of 'indigenous'. Its etymology (Greek, *chthōn*: earth) emphasises the particular and 'placed' nature of the beliefs and practices to which I refer, as well as the intimate relationship in Ndonga culture between persons/bodies, spirits and landscape, the themes upon which the study focuses.

are the uncritical assumptions that the *Kalunga* and Christian belief systems are monolithic, and that they might be subject to a neat exchange.

Maija Hiltunen's complementary monographs on the Owambo 'magico-religious' world (1986 and 1993) – based upon Finnish missionary records and her own missionary experience in the region – make related claims. She considers converts to have made a 'sharp' break with indigenous beliefs (1986: 17). In her first work, she states categorically that 'the belief in [witchcraft and sorcery] has vanished' (1986: 157). In her second study, Hiltunen concludes that 'today good magic no longer occurs in Ovambo to the extent it did about a hundred years ago. As Christianity has gained a foothold, good and bad magic has been made obsolete' (1993: 10).

Meredith McKittrick's socio-historical study is focused on 'why its peoples embraced Christianity with such distinctive enthusiasm' (2002: 3). McKittrick traces the phases Christianity goes through in the region, beginning with the arrival of the missionaries with '*uukristi*, which they opposed to something they called *uupagan*' (2002: 13). Despite the success of *uukristi* (Christianity), there were protracted 'struggles' regarding how distinct it had to be from *uupagani* ('paganism'). Not all could accept the behavioural changes demanded by belonging to *uukristi* and some abandoned it entirely (2002: 15). The restrictions proved particularly irksome to the older, wealthier, and more powerful members of the community (2002: 92). The situation in the 1930s is notable for its 'fluidity', there being a 'mass "reversion" to indigenous practices that the missionaries in the east identified' (2002: 212). However, the 'blurring' of the two traditions that had become apparent in the 1940s was tackled by the youth, who initiated the *Epapudhuko* ('Awakening') revival movement in 1952. Thereafter, Christianity became the 'dominant social identity', with elders converting 'in large numbers' (2002: 15). This leads McKittrick to claims that 'from the perspective of the 1990s, ... more than 90 percent of the [Owambo] population was Christian, and virtually all indigenous religious practice, from male initiation to rainmaking to offering sacrifices to ancestors, had vanished' (2002: 1). As she explains:

Most people professed themselves unable to describe or explain a vast array of beliefs and rituals that had been recorded by missionaries and local informants from the 1870s to the 1930s. As one informant put it when asked by the author when the practice of rainmaking had died out:

All these things died with the coming of missionaries. ... Today these things are useless. If you try them today they won't work, but they were helpful in the past. I don't know what your people [Europeans] did

to my people, because even non-Christians do not practice what they believe. The belief is there, but they don't practice it.

MCKITTRICK 2002: 1–2

And yet, for this participant in McKittrick's study, there remains a tension, a level of ambivalence. This brings into relief the 'struggles' (2002: 15), 'blurring' (2002: 8), 'intermingling' (2002: 117) and 'constant exchange of symbols, ideas, and knowledge' (2002: 116) that the author later mentions. Indeed, this sense of the resilience of traditional beliefs and/or practices and the resistance of many to the missionary (and later popular youth) attempts to polarise *uukristi* and *uupagani* (McKittrick 2002: 8, 15) is echoed elsewhere.

There was considerable Owambo resistance to missionisation from some, as well as participation in 'both systems, the pagan and the Christian' by others (Dymond 1950: 152). Treatment for illness (in Owamboland and neighbouring areas) is one of the markers indicating the ongoing significance of autochthonous cosmologies, expressed both in terms of beliefs (concerning aetiology and the persistence of witchcraft) and practices (visiting a diviner-healer: *onganga*⁵): people would visit both diviner-healers and mission hospitals (Koppe 1995 and de Jongh 1998). In reference to the Kavango region, Ineke Koppe suggests that 'the indigenous cosmological order and the Christian faith seem to melt together' (1995: 12). This is a finding that Kim Groop shares in his examination of reported spirit attacks in Owambo schools: 'Owambo traditional belief and Christian comprehensions intertwine' (2010: 166).

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of interaction and engagement between ATR and Christianity is the extent of the terminological appropriation from indigenous cosmological thought into vernacular biblical translations and liturgy, creating 'a form of syncretism' (Groop 2010: 158). The Finnish missionaries feared syncretism (Brasche 2009: 57–8; Shigwedha 2006: 177). And yet, they appropriated the name of the Owambo supreme being – *Kalunga* – to identify the Christian God in their missionisation and translation. This, despite

5 The term *onganga* (s.) is often translated as 'witchdoctor'. However, that designation carries pejorative connotations and may be misunderstood as aligning the practitioner with witchcraft. I translate it 'diviner-healer', recognising the diverse, positive services people sought/seek from *oonganga* (pl.). The translation 'witchdoctor' is only given when used by others, whether in scholarship or those I worked with. The term *onganga* may be understood positively as a traditional healer who attends to those who have been bewitched or who wish to engage apotropaic measures against such an eventuality. The negative connotations arise largely from the engagement between autochthonous culture and Christianity, the activities of *oonganga* being a cause of particular concern to the missionaries and leading to the demonisation of their services.

Kalunga's very different characteristics from God; *Kalunga* was, for example, understood to be a remote being (Aarni 1982: 64), conceptually distant from an immanent, personal Christian God.

The use of the term *Kalunga* in the *Ombiimbeli Ondjapuki* (Holy Bible), as well as *ombepo* (wind, breath, free-soul), *oshiluli* (restless spirit) and *aathithi* (ancestral spirits), are but a few examples of terminological (and, therefore, conceptual) appropriation from Owambo cosmologies. Not every instance of appropriation was accurate: *oonganga* (diviner-healers) and *aalodhi* (witches) were conflated and condemned as practitioners of 'witchcraft' (*uulodhi*), despite the fact that *oonganga* were understood to combat *uulodhi* (Groop 2010: 159; cf. Dube 1999). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that 'although Christians in the north, in general, considered belief in witchcraft and ancestor spirits rather shameful, many strongly believed that they existed and feared them' (Groop 2010: 161).

Studies in costume (Shigwedha 2006) and ritual (Nampala 2006) reveal the extent to which the indigenous has been brought to bear on Christian beliefs and practices surrounding clothing, adornment, naming, initiation, marital and funerary rites. Indeed, there is a sense in which Owamboland is engaged in a revival, involving the reclamation and re-invention of tradition through the performance of cultural heritage (Fairweather 2003, 2004 and 2006). An underlying sense of cultural 'loss' and desire for cultural 'recuperation' (Brasche 2009: 171) can be traced back to the South African apartheid government's 'cultural genocide' in Owamboland (Brasche 2009: 229) and may explain a recent resurgence of traditional names and clothing (Brasche 2009: 106–7).

The persistence of ATR in Owambo contexts, indicated by the scholarship above, speaks to the 'tenacity of indigenous cultures' (Dube 2012: 11). This is a feature commonly acknowledged in and celebrated by African biblical scholarship. Indeed, 'the culture and/as religion of Africans that was denigrated and partially destroyed by the colonial-missionary enterprise [has been] "revitalised" (Sanneh 1989: 53) by African biblical interpretation' (West 2018: 247). In line with ABS, this study seeks to illustrate some of the ways in which ATR endures in Ondonga and the ways in which it engages with Christianity. Further, it will celebrate Ndonga culture (*omuthigululwakalo gwaaNdonga*) as an 'equal partner' in dialogical biblical interpretation (Mbuvi 2017: 152).

2 Cross-Cultural (Grassroots) Biblical Interpretation Groups

African biblical scholarship openly acknowledges that it is informed by cultural perspectives, contextuality and rootedness in socio-political realities.

'Mainstream academic biblical studies and theology', on the other hand, 'is steeped in Eurocentric perspectives' (Dube 2012: 18). This Euro-American core, with its 'objective' tendencies and 'scientist ethos' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988: 11) seems far removed from the realities of biblical communities and may therefore have much to learn from its African colleagues. Making African realities and interpreters central to the project, as resources and subjects, is premised upon the suggestion that 'African culture may have resources to understand the Bible differently from Euro-American biblical scholarship' (West 2018: 249). It has been suggested that there are aspects of commonality between African worldviews and New Testament worldviews, particularly with regard to cosmological perspectives – an understanding, for example, of the porosity of the spiritual and physical worlds (see, amongst others, Mbiti 1971; Ukpong 1995; Loba-Mkole 2008; and Mbuvi 2017). These perspectives offer African interpreters 'epistemological privilege' (Loba-Mkole 2008: 1362) and allow African interpreters to identify easily – even 'seamlessly' (Mbuvi 2017: 165) – with New Testament texts.

The methodology advanced here seeks to draw upon this potential commonality of worldview. It is called, and involves convening, Cross-Cultural (Grassroots) Biblical Interpretation Groups (CCBIGs; explored more fully in Chapters 1 and 2). These interpretative groups are invited to reflect on their context and selected biblical texts, aiming to find aspects of comparison and contrast therein. This approach is therefore 'tri-polar' (West 2018) in that it focuses on context, text and appropriation. It shares its emphasis on African cultures with Inculturation Hermeneutics (Ukpong 1995 and 1996), within which African contexts and people act as 'active components' in the interpretative endeavour (Loba-Mkole 2008: 1362).

The 'Cross-Cultural' element serves to precipitate (here, for a non-African in an African context) a sense of culture shock – an encounter with difference. That the groups are located in an African context provides a point of contrast with, for example, my own Western positionality and Eurocentric concerns/epistemology. This study therefore attempts to place equal emphasis on a fourth pole – that of dialogue between grassroots African interpretations and professional interpretations from within the biblical studies academy (Western, African, or otherwise).

Because the approach is cross-cultural, it incorporates an anthropological element into the overall process of biblical interpretation. To that end, the groups focus on their context, worldviews and practices and juxtapose them with the biblical narrative at hand, in this case engaging in '... a dialogue between biblical text and African context' (West 2018: 259). Thereafter, I analyse

the resulting interpretations alongside ethnographic (and other) literature, tracing influences from the (dynamic) cultural context in which the interpretation groups are taking place. A doubly contextual approach – contextualising the ‘contextual’ interpretations returned by the host community with reference to anthropological works and my own fieldwork experience in Ondonga – serves a particularist agenda and avoids essentialising the alternative culture with which, and within which, I am engaging in collaborative interpretation.

In fusing anthropological approaches with contextual interpretation, I have been heavily influenced by the crisis of representation in anthropology and its reflexive turn. Contemporary anthropology and ethnography acknowledge that there is no such thing as a fixed ‘Culture’ and that the anthropologist cannot not pretend to be an impartial, objective observer and reporter of cultures. Instead, it seeks to acknowledge the dynamic nature of cultural contexts and the influence of the ethnographer themselves in any attempt to evoke the characteristics of a given context. Contemporary anthropology is thus characterised by uncertainty, reflexivity, and dialogue with local collaborators. It has distanced itself from supposedly objective, dispassionate description of a fixed cultural ‘object’.

Taking account of the crisis of representation, and preferring to avoid generalisations about Owamboland, I have narrowed the focus in this study to a particular context: the village of Iihongo. Similarly, I cannot tackle the broader considerations that an anthropological study might attempt and do not offer a structured or comprehensive overview of Iihongo or Ondonga ways of life. By way of alternative, I focus on three themes that have risen to prominence having considered the literature falling under Owambo studies and having analysed the CCBIGs transcripts: *Bodies*, *Spirits*, and *Landscapes*. Each of these themes is examined from multiple viewpoints. The interpretative chapters touch on birthing, eating, bleeding, possessed, adorned, neo-natal, dead, and buried bodies. Spirits come to the fore as prominent presences in the Iihongo community, influencing the living persons, their homes, land, and movements. Perspectives on landscapes are engaged when considering domestic, agricultural, burial and wilderness spaces (as well as the metaphorical ‘social landscape’). Each of the texts considered raises questions about at least two of these three themes:

Chapter 3: Wedding Parables (Matthew 22:1–14 & Luke 14:7–11)

Bodies: Feasting, Adorned, Initiated.

Spirits: Ancestral.

Landscapes: Domestic, Social.

Chapter 4: Jairus and the Haemorrhaging Woman (Mark 5:21–43)

Bodies: Bleeding, Gendered, Healing.

Landscapes: Social.

Chapter 5: Legion (Luke 8:26–39)

Bodies: Out of Place, Possessed, Naked, Buried.

Spirits: Restless, Evil, Ancestral.

Landscapes: Domestic, Burial, Agricultural, Wild.

Chapter 6: 'Nature Miracles' (Mark 4:35–41 & 6:45–52)

Spirits: Restless, Nature, Ancestral.

Landscapes: Weatherscapes, Waterscapes, Homestead.

Chapter 7: Resurrection Appearances (Luke 24:1–49)

Spirits: Restless, Ancestral.

Landscapes: Domestic, Burial, Agricultural, Social.

The 'Biblical Interpretation' in CCBIGs signals that this is – diverging from Contextual Bible Study (hereafter, CBS; see, for example, West 1993 and 2003) as its 'parent' approach – a non-confessional methodology, which has no liberationist agenda. It draws on many aspects of CBS, as well as ABS more generally, including ethics of dispersed authority and dialogue (echoing those in anthropology after the reflexive turn). However, its central focus is on bringing diverse voices into the interpretative conversation and democratising biblical studies.

Engagement with professional biblical scholarship on the texts chosen (Matthew 22:1–14 & Luke 14:7–11; Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:26–39; Mark 4:35–41 & 6:45–52; Luke 24) has been (necessarily) limited. The CCBIG interpretations serve to inform, challenge, or nuance the interpretive approach of professional scholars by offering a cross-cultural perspective, and bring the culturally-situated, contextual perspective of the latter into greater relief. Certainly, the Iihongo interpretations have challenged many of my own assumptions, offered fresh lenses through which to consider the texts, and encouraged me to reappraise critically the similarly (but often unacknowledged) perspectival nature of some of the dominant voices in New Testament scholarship. They have drawn attention to my own (Western) contextuality and nuanced dominant interpretative narratives (Western/Eurocentric or otherwise). Herein, dialogue is most frequently engendered between the CCBIG interpretations and professional 'Western' interpretations. This indexes my personal location as a Westerner and is not intended to present biblical studies as a 'Western'

discipline. It speaks to my attempt to confront and interrogate my own interpretative tendencies and the hegemonic bodies of literature with which my worldview aligns or by which I might otherwise be persuaded. It is the encounter with grassroots Ndonga interpretations that has enabled me to achieve this. Time-pressure necessarily entails less engagement with bodies of professional African interpretation (other than dedicated engagement in Chapter 7) than might be desired.

The last aspect – the ‘Groups’ – signifies that this approach is resolutely dialogical. This aspect is informed by CBS and contemporary anthropology. Recognising knowledge to be situational and perspectival, this approach focuses on collaborative interpretation and the benefits of an encounter (whether that between researcher and host community, between individuals within the groups convened, or between scholarly and grassroots bodies of interpretation). Over 100 people participated in this project, attending the men’s group (*Ootate*: ‘the fathers’), the women’s group (*Oomeme*: ‘the mothers’), the children’s group (*Aanona*: ‘the children’), giving individual interviews, and generously taking the time to share aspects of their culture and lives with me. Drawing on so many resources, the approach attempts to generate polyvocal responses to texts and foster an atmosphere in which a variety of, and even conflicting, interpretations are received with equal respect. Nonetheless, in the researcher’s analysis of the transcripts generated, themes and trends will necessarily be identified for comparison and contrast with trends in professional scholarship.

Part 1 of the book is concerned with methodology and offers a conceptual treatment of methodological approaches taken. Chapter 1 details the rationale behind the methodological approach adopted – Cross-Cultural (Grassroots) Biblical Interpretation Groups (CCBIGs) – drawing upon both anthropology and CBS. Chapter 2 explains the method’s practical application, including details of text selection, facilitation and composition of groups, and the fieldwork experience.

In Part 2, Chapters 3–7 present, analyse and bring into conversation with professional scholarship the biblical interpretations returned by the CCBIGs in Iihongo. Each of the fieldwork chapters presents the salient themes of the CCBIG discussions, contextualising them in their anthropological setting (using ethnographic and other literature) before engaging academic biblical scholarship. The contextual interpretations must themselves be contextualised in order to appreciate aspects of continuity and discontinuity with past worldviews and practices and to appreciate ATR fully as a dialogue partner. On their own, the transcripts form a valuable corpus of interpretations from groups of grassroots interpreters in an African context. However, I have sought

to do justice to the insights the participants brought to the texts, as well as to their support for the project, by bringing the salient themes from each CCBIG round into conversation with biblical scholarship.

My approach shares with other forms of ABS its location in a post-colonial context, its foregrounding of African cultural and religious realities, and its recognition of 'the African religio-cultural reality as a sufficient starting point for interpreting the Bible (Manus 2003b: iii–iv)' (Mbuvi 2017: 161). Whilst I do not claim to engage interpretation of the Bible to tackle social injustice on the ground, I am engaged in ABS as an ideological 'site-of-struggle' (West 2018: 242). I do attempt to contribute to '... efforts to displace Eurocentric biblical studies, by positing other ways and places of reading' (Dube 2012: 18; see also Dube 2001 and West & Dube 1996a). While the 'other place' is Ondonga, Namibia, the 'other way' of reading is in CCBIGs (influenced by other contextual, African approaches). Taking an Afrocentric approach, I have attended to the power of these particular African interpretations to upend, challenge and nuance Eurocentric academic interpretations (Chapters 3–6), thus destabilising 'Western hermeneutical hegemony' (Dube 2012: 12), and to contribute more generally to the growing body of African biblical interpretation (Chapter 3–7).

This book argues that an encounter-driven methodological approach such as CCBIGs will contribute significantly towards the diversification and decentering of biblical studies. This contrapuntal approach is an exercise in disruption, engaging in multi-directional encounter and dialogue and, thereafter, using culture-shock as an interrogative tool to challenge and nuance normative interpretations, which are often inflected by post-Enlightenment and post-industrialist 'rationalism' and a demythologised, scientific bias (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988). By foregrounding African locations as sites of interpretative expertise, this approach contributes to ABS and highlights the contextual nature of 'mainstream academic biblical studies', 'steeped' as it is 'in Eurocentric perspectives' (Dube 2012: 17).

PART 1

Methodology



Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Groups: Contextual Voices and Contextual Realities as Sites of Interpretative Expertise

We are enriched by encounters with unfamiliar worldviews and interpretations, as well as by coming to an understanding of the cultural contexts that influence those worldviews and interpretations. Such encounters also lend us the tools to recognise more clearly our own worldviews and, crucially, the particularities of our contexts that influence our own interpretative perspectives. In other words, ‘culture shock’ is a vital tool in recognising our own positionality. As a methodology, Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Groups (CCBIGs) capitalises on the benefits of culture shock. This chapter will explore the prompting need for such an approach, as well as its grounding in the concerns of its ‘parent’ methods: CBS and anthropological research. Chapter 2 will delineate its precise characteristics (CC-BI-Gs), as well as its application in practice.¹

As an academic discipline, Biblical Studies has long been populated in the majority by Western interpreters and Western interpretative lenses. The Euro-American, white male – in multiple positions of social, economic, and political privilege – who is schooled in a post-Enlightenment ‘rationalist’ context, has been dominant.² And yet, the contextual nature of the resulting interpretations (with their scientific, ‘rationalist’, industrialist, and demythologising biases) has rarely been acknowledged in the works themselves. Even as the academy has decentred and diversified, Western ideologies remain pervasive: that the majority of non-Western biblical scholars have undertaken biblical training in Western contexts, informed by Western approaches (particularly, historical criticism), adds an (admittedly unavoidable) emphasis to the resulting body of scholarship. It is difficult, in this regard, to find a corpus of biblical

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- 1 Material from this methodological discussion (Chapters 1 and 2), as well as the textual case study in Chapter 6, was published as ‘Conversations in Context: Cross-Cultural (Grassroots) Biblical Interpretation Groups Challenging Western-centric (Professional) Biblical Interpretation’ in *Biblical Interpretation* 27 (2019): 36–68.
 - 2 Helpful reflection on the emergence of the discipline of Biblical Studies from the Enlightenment period can be found in Sheehan 2004, Legaspi 2010, and Moore & Sherwood 2011.

scholarship (or a method via which one might attain it) that is unaffected to any great extent by peculiarly Western perspectives.

A 'Western worldview' thus permeates biblical scholarship, grounding it in Western presumptions, Western ideological orientations, and (predominantly) Protestant confessional agendas.³ Furthermore, biblical scholarship takes a pronounced top-down approach, such that even when non-Western worldviews are taken into account, they are often mediated through Western or Western-educated scholarly voices. Underrepresented and undervalued, then, are diverse (yet particular) cultural perspectives *and* grassroots interpretative voices (that is, those without academic training in biblical criticism) from those diverse cultural settings.⁴ It seems to me that there is resistance in the academy to give full voice on the one hand to 'non-Western' interpretations and on the other to 'non-academic' interpretations, perhaps indicated by the labelling of such approaches as (merely?) 'contextual'. Is it not the case that all interpretations are contextually grounded, and should their contextuality not be openly acknowledged instead of maintaining the pretence of 'objectivity'? After all, where biblical scholarship is Western-dominated and unreflexive, the gulf between the interpreters of the texts and the texts themselves arguably remains at its most extreme.

Implied in my approach is a critique of the practice of applying a 'contextual' label to certain bodies of interpretation, a label with which I am deeply uncomfortable, not least because I sense it is taken less seriously by advocates of 'traditional' criticism who are positioned at the normative core of the academy (dominated by the multiply-privileged white, Western male). I agree with Alissa Jones Nelson's suggestion that vernacular approaches have been

3 As noted in the introduction, my use of the term 'Western' as it relates to biblical scholarship is intended to refer to the post-Enlightenment, demythologised, and scientistic perspective that is prevalent in the discipline. However, I recognise that this is something of a generalisation. Not all Western scholars would agree with my terminology. I maintain the generalisation, however, in an effort to emphasise the effect that the Enlightenment has had on Western scholarship and epistemology.

4 An explicit focus on the decentring of biblical scholarship is to be found in the following works (amongst others): Bailey, Liew & Segovia 2009; Boer & Segovia 2012; Lozada & Carey 2013; Patte 1995a and 1995b; Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 1988, 1999 and 2000; Segovia 2000a and 2000b; Segovia & Tolbert 1995a and 1995b; and Sugirtharajah 1998a and 1998b, 2006 and 2008. Nevertheless, decentring approaches have consistently been marginalised and directly contrasted with the normative historical-critical (predominantly white, Western) paradigm. Tat-siong Benny Liew argues that suspicion of minority critics in Biblical Studies is reminiscent of the immigration debate in the United States: marginal interpreters may be seen as 'illegal immigrants', in some way trespassing on the traditional core (2008: 44).

'ghettoised' and that a 'contrapuntal' approach is necessary to challenge the marginalisation of vernacular interpretation beyond the 'academic' core (2014: 101 and 11). Increasingly, I am inclined to mine from the 'contextual' label aspects of latent prejudice and discrimination, for it marginalises bodies of scholarship from all of those who are non-normative, be that because of their sex or gender (for example, feminist criticism), national or ethnic origin (for example, Asian, Asian-American, Latino(a), African, African-American or womanist criticism), their sexual orientation (for example, queer criticism), or because they interpret with people who fit such categories (for example, my own work). Of course, my own scholarship is rightly labelled 'contextual' but only because – as with every other interpreter – I (and the participants in this study) come from a context, the influence of which should be duly acknowledged. In the academy's terms, however, it is 'contextual' because it explicitly works with a context beyond the Eurocentric, 'objective' core. It is that designation I dispute here. Mbuvi notes that ABS faces a similar challenge:

African biblical scholars have also pointed out an underlying racism, persistent colonialist and imperialist impulses, that have pervaded biblical studies in the west, leading to a failure to recognize works by African biblical scholars (and other marginalized scholars) as "authentic" biblical studies (Adamo 1998, 2006).

MBUVI 2017: 156

Bringing cross-cultural contextual interpretations into dialogue with normative Western interpretations and attempting to disrupt the latter is a form of minority criticism, despite the fact that I am a scholar from a majority (white, Western) background. Discussing the significance of the image on the cover of their edited volume on minority criticism (*They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*. Atlanta, GA: SBL), Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew and Fernando F. Segovia recognise this:

The wood structure, which is not only artificially constructed but also slightly skewed, represents the model or edifice of traditional (read: white) scholarship. It appears inflamed and lit up – as well as partially burnt – by the color-full fire from within. Like a fire, minority biblical scholarship defies containment, whether attempted by whites or persons of color. Various sparks within the fire represent not only the multiple locations of minority biblical criticism but also the varied illuminations it may shed on the Bible. Like the book cover, biblical criticism – minority

or not – is an art that, as Odette Lockwood-Stewart reminds us, requires creativity as well as courage and may function at times to disturb and destabilize.

BAILEY, LIEW & SEGOVIA 2009: ix

I prefer to characterise the contextual aspect of my research as a constructive challenge to those bodies of scholarship not accorded the same designation. I thus embrace the process of ‘disturbance’ and ‘destabilisation’ to which Bailey, Liew and Segovia refer. I take an avowedly cross-cultural approach and suggest that seeking out the culture shock in a mutually enlightening ‘contextual’ encounter serves to hold a mirror up to my own contextual location. This engagement in a ‘contextual’ endeavour (beyond the normative core) serves to expose the unacknowledged contextual nature of the normative position (in which, aside from my situation as a woman, I sit). I am forced, and rightly so, to confront my own positionality in what is a deliberately reflexive process. Furthermore, I am thus enabled to critique the bodies of scholarship inflected by the worldview(s) and perspective(s) that I – previously less self-consciously – inhabit.

I argue here that interpreting with a broader range of worldviews, expressed by a broader range of interpreters, might enhance and nuance our capacity for biblical interpretation. Our worldview – the way in which we conceive of and understand the world around us – is intrinsic, after all, to how we interpret texts *about* the world. My Western, [post]industrial, scientific, [post]modern worldview – to name but a few qualifiers! – bears little resemblance to the worldviews that generated or are portrayed in the texts (or would have been held by their earliest audiences), and yet my scholarly context *supposedly* gives me privileged insight into unlocking biblical narratives and meanings.

One approach to the bridging of this epistemological gap, thereby engendering a greater appreciation of the particularities of biblical contexts, has been to employ critical theory. For example, New Testament Studies has made considerable use of postcolonial theory in a bid to engage with the realities of Empire for the Jesus Movement and Early Christianity.⁵ Marginalised, however, have been the insights of grassroots interpreters in contemporary postcolonial contexts; the elite, distanced, scholarly voice (albeit sometimes a scholarly voice from those postcolonial settings) remains at the forefront (for example,

5 See, for example: Boer 2001a and 2001b; Carter 2004; Donaldson 1996; Dube 2000; Dube & Staley 2002; Horsley 1997, 2001, 2003; Moore 2006; Moore & Segovia 2005; Myers 1988; Segovia 2000a and 2000b; Segovia & Sugirtharajah 2009; Sugirtharajah 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b, 2001 and 2002.

Dube 2000; Dube, Mbuvi & Mbuwayesango 2012; Horsley 1997, 2001 and 2003; Punt 2015; Segovia & Sugirtharajah 2009).⁶ I suggest it would be appropriate to attempt to interpret texts that depict postcolonial settings in dialogue with people (and not just scholars) from postcolonial settings. Likewise, if dealing with texts that discuss spirit presences and possession, then interpretations from people whose worldviews (and experiences of reality) incorporate spirit beings might be illuminating. Not only would this serve to offer fresh possible avenues of interpretation and democratise biblical scholarship, but it also functions to hold a mirror up to dominant scholarly interpretations and bring into relief their contextual biases. The interpretative insights in particular voices from beyond the Euro-American, elite scholarly core of Biblical Studies ought to be foregrounded *both* for their inherent value as possible interpretations *and* for their capacity to disrupt, destabilise, challenge, and nuance the abstracted, published, scholarly 'voicing' of Western-centric interpretations.

Both the northern Namibian (Ovambo) context and the social world(s) in which the New Testament was produced and received are heterogeneous, and the product of encounters between various traditions and worldviews (whether labelled 'traditional', 'animistic', 'monotheistic', 'polytheistic', and so on). Being largely pre-industrial, agrarian/agro-pastoralist, and steeped in autochthonous traditions (but having encountered 'immigrant', text-centric Christianity), the Ovambo context in which the texts have been interpreted here shares more in common with the nature of New Testament contexts than would a post-industrial, post-Enlightenment, contemporary Western context (such as my own). I am not alone in suggesting that there may be useful resonances between African worldviews and those in the Bible. John S. Pobee, for example, argues that there are plenty of touchstones between a traditional African worldview and, further, that culture should be a hermeneutic for reading scripture (1996: 166–67). Working with interpreters in such a milieu therefore offers the potential for illuminating aspects of the New Testament traditions that remain hidden or opaque when viewed through a Eurocentric lens.

Before I fully expound my rationale to the reader (as well as its practical application), however, it is important to demonstrate its advantages against a background of cross-cultural and grassroots approaches. I begin, then, with

6 Although an emphasis on grassroots interpretation is to be found in the CBS method (for example, West 1993, 2003 and 2007), the liberationist agenda of that corpus of scholarship – much of which originates from postcolonial settings – means it is less interested in questions of the reality of empire for the Jesus Movement and Early Christianity *in the first instance*; questions about contemporary realities are prioritised.

an example of a cross-cultural hermeneutic from India: that of Dalit feminist interpretation in the scholarship of Surekha Nelavala. This example is suggestive of a move to engage a cross-cultural worldview in biblical interpretation with something of a bottom-up perspective. However, it does not incorporate the actual interpretations of those on the ground, and so I move on to focus on CBS, with its focus on the contextual (and often non-Western) interpretation by the 'ordinary reader'. While this, too, has had considerable influence on the diversification of the interpretative endeavour, its focus is explicitly confessional and liberationist, as opposed to interpretation-centred. What is lacking is an interpretation-focused, cross-cultural methodology that also engages grassroots expertise; I promote such an approach as the chapter progresses: Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Groups (CCBIGs), the aim of which is *to generate possible interpretations in diverse cultural settings and to bring those into conversation with professional biblical scholarship*.

1 Interpreting Biblical Texts with Alternative Worldviews and Social Locations: the Dalit Feminist Interpretation of Surekha Nelavala

The publication in the 1990s of such seminal works as R.S. Sugirtharajah's *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Sugirtharajah 2006) and Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert's two-volume work, *Reading from This Place* (1995), serves to illustrate the process of diversification and decentring that has undoubtedly begun in Biblical Studies. 'Real readers' (Carey 2013: 3) have been on the agenda since this period, with the acknowledgement of the powerful influence and interpretative voice of the located interpreter. This trend also indexes the positive valuation of social locations across the globe in contributing to the (only recently) shared endeavour of biblical interpretation.

Although these approaches rightly move beyond Western interpretative frameworks by embracing understandings from other cultural contexts, they nonetheless focus on the social location of the scholars themselves. In certain cases, this limitation is explicitly acknowledged: let us consider, for example, the Dalit Feminist Interpretation of Surekha Nelavala. Dalit ('untouchable') biblical interpretation focuses on the experience of the most marginalised group in an India dominated by caste stratification. Nelavala – a Dalit woman whose scholarship concerns interpretation in light of the multi-marginalised experience of women in this context – describes its progress as follows:

Dalit readings of the Bible or Dalit theology has emerged in the last two decades during a time of deep disenchantment with traditional scholarly methods of doing theology and reading scripture in India. It is taking shape with resistance against dominant groups whose theology is known as Indian Christian Theology, mainly produced by upper caste men who ignored the experience and issues of Dalits and never deemed the caste system as contrary to the values of the gospel and of justice.

NELAVALA 2006: 64–5

Dalit readings thus succeed in decentring Indian biblical interpretation in their foregrounding of the ‘voices’ of those systematically silenced by their society. However, two concerns arise with regard to such bodies of ‘marginal’ interpretation. Nelavala describes her autobiographical approach as about “‘ourselves’” (2006: 65) and as a process of wresting the text(s) from upper castes and from senior males (2007: 3). And yet, the work of interpretation is being done by a biblical scholar who has had privileged access to education in a First World context (USA), and who is now reading *for* or *on behalf of* an ordinary community (*for* Dalit women with ‘unabashedly liberationist’ aims [Nelavala 2006: 64]). In Nelavala’s case, a scholarly woman (‘elite’, in educational status) interprets for Dalit women *in general*, rather than allowing the grassroots voices to come to the fore on their own terms as alternative forms of expertise. Thus, while this approach is successful in challenging some hierarchies, there are others it cannot escape. Nelavala is highly conscious of the distance between herself and Dalit women on the ground, for she expressly addresses this tension under the subtitle ‘Who “speaks” Dalit feminism? Subjectivity vs. Representation’ in *Liberation Beyond Borders: Dalit Feminist Hermeneutics and Four Gospel Women* (2008). She comments:

As a Dalit woman who can speak, not only do I claim my identity with Dalit women who cannot speak, but also acknowledge specific differences in my perspective from them. That is, situating myself as a Dalit feminist biblical reader, living in a developed country, I bring a drastically different experience from that of a typical Dalit woman living in India, which then calls into question the normative claim of experience in speaking for Dalit feminism. However, what shapes my standpoint is that I was born a Dalit woman with particular experiences of internalized shame due to the stigma of untouchability, and the sensibility that came from memory, the stories that I have heard from my mother and

grandmother, and the lives of blood relatives who continue to live in the same drastic condition. Thus, I am distant yet close to the life situation of Dalit women. Striving to situate myself with other Dalit women represents my choice to safeguard my position as a Dalit feminist speaker and to assert the validity of my understanding of the pain-pathos of Dalit women, which is a unique identity.

NELAVALA 2008: 28

The second concern, beyond that of interpreting *for*, is the Western worldviews and ideologies embedded in Western training and their influence on the Dalit 'voice' that emerges (Nelavala trained and lives in the USA). Slightly underplayed is the influence of Western worldviews, perspectives, and/or interpretative concerns (transmitted through education) on Nelavala's interpretation, although she does expressly distance herself in terms of 'educational and economic *status*' from the majority of Dalit women (2008: 29, emphasis added). Nelavala's description highlights for us the distance between grassroots Dalit women's experiences and her own:

They are naïve, mostly illiterate, hard-working, ignorant, and poor laborers, who experience untouchability, marginalization, and discrimination in every aspect of their lives, yet cannot voice, analyze or use their struggles to develop a theory and to find their way to liberation. Thus, Dalit women, for the most part, remain subaltern because of their inability to speak up.

NELAVALA 2008: 26

Reading *on behalf of* grassroots communities by Western-trained scholars does risk perpetuating the hegemony of Western worldviews, which might otherwise be offset by interpreting the text with 'readers' who have not experienced a Western education. To my mind, the above citation rather prompts the question: given the particularity of their experience and voicelessness, why not read *with* Dalit women, rather than *for* them? And so, I now turn to scholarly efforts to read *with* marginal communities and foreground their voices and interpretations.

2 Interpreting Biblical Texts with Grassroots Participants: Contextual Bible Study

Musa W. Dube reflects on the expansion of biblical criticism in African settings beyond the historical-critical normative core:

If one is sent to schools whose methods do not represent openness to the diversity of readers, or to be more blunt, school [*sic*] that use methods of upper class, white males, it may stifle one's interest in biblical studies since the methods are designed to ask questions of a certain class other than your own concerns and world. This, I believe, partly explains the divergence of many Sub-Saharan African scholars, who were trained in the West as biblical exegetes in historical methods. The bulk of these scholars (you can name them: John Mbiti, John Pobee, Kwesi Dickson) diverted from historical critical training after graduate studies. They came to focus on inculturation hermeneutics and Black biblical hermeneutics. In the light of what is now known about historical criticism, it is now evident that most African scholars trained in historical criticism found that the methods they learnt did not allow them even to begin to ask questions about their social location, since that would amount to *eisegesis*. Fortunately, a wide range of methods of reading the Bible have now come into existence.

DUBE 2004: 46

One of the 'wide range of methods' that Dube mentions – and one that challenges both the hegemony of the Western worldviews and interpretative influences as well as the dominance of the unchallenged privileged insight of the scholar – is Contextual Bible Study. CBS is a means of using biblical texts to understand contemporary contexts better and to galvanise groups into action, into challenging oppressive structures or aspects of community and context. The focus is on examination of the biblical text in order to *act*, as part of the See-Judge-Act process.⁷ Groups will therefore gather to engage critically with a biblical text and ask how it might contribute to a better understanding of their context and issues they face therein. Facilitators (often biblical scholars, or those trained by them) guide the group through the process, posing questions about the contemporary context and the biblical text, and encouraging the use of each to reflect on the other. This process was established by Gerald O. West (and others) at the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB), South Africa, primarily with the aim of providing a liberatory resource and agent for change in communities suffering under the oppression of the apartheid regime. West, who trained in the UK, focuses his attention squarely on the needs of grassroots communities and interprets in dialogue with them. CBS's enormous success is visible in the work of the Ujamaa Centre (successor to the ISB) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and in the work of

7 See: survey the contextual reality; Judge: engage in a close, critical reading of the text, given that contextual reality; Act: engage in social action in order to better that contextual reality.

Musa Dube (University of Botswana), although a range of scholars and community groups have undertaken CBS across the globe.

CBS, in West's formulation and as undertaken by the Ujamaa Centre at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, rests on two explicit assumptions: firstly, he affirms the fact that trained biblical scholars have much to offer the community of ordinary⁸ readers in their attempts to interpret the Bible. Secondly, West affirms the value of the ordinary readers' interpretations as contributions to the community and academy's search for appropriate interpretations of biblical texts. As the name 'Ujamaa' suggests (cooperation for collective advancement), the centre and its methodology is oriented toward biblically grounded social development initiatives.

The above two assumptions are followed by West's statement of four commitments which form the cornerstones of the contextual process. These four commitments come from the original mission statement of the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB). This was established in Pietermaritzburg in 1990 and aimed to counteract the apartheid authorities' uses and abuses of scripture by generating liberating readings from interfaces between scholars and local communities. West states them as follows:

1. A commitment to read the Bible from the perspective of the South African context, particularly from the perspective of the poor and oppressed.
2. A commitment to read the Bible in community with others, particularly with those from contexts different from our own.
3. A commitment to read the Bible critically.
4. A commitment to individual and social transformation through contextual Bible study.

WEST 1993: 12

With regard to decentring biblical scholarship, CBS and related contextual approaches have successfully given voice to 'ordinary readers' in Southern Africa and Latin America. The extent of CBS's success may be seen in the extent to which it has travelled around the globe and has been employed – taking just my own location of the UK as an example – in the work of Louise J. Lawrence

8 West's work particularly focuses on partnership between 'socially engaged biblical scholars' and 'ordinary readers', the latter being (in a general sense) pre-critical, untrained readers who (in a particular sense) come from poor, oppressed and marginalised sections of society. West's context work usually focuses on poor, black communities in South Africa and often on women as a subset within those communities.

(2009 and 2013), Janet Lees (2007a and 2007b) and John Riches (2010), amongst others. For the purposes of my discussion, its benefits may be set out as follows: it successfully taps a rich interpretative vein in the form of non-scholarly voices, and often presents the wider academic community with understandings of texts from a diverse selection of contexts, many of them non-Western.

2.1 *The Influence of Contextual Bible Study on Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Groups*

The CCBIGS approach thus adopts CBS's focus on contextual realities and takes as its starting point the practice of interpreting biblical texts in collaboration with grassroots discussion groups. It does so in order to tap into the possibility raised by West that 'perhaps ordinary African "readers" can help us recover readings of the Bible that [training in biblical scholarship] blinds us to' (2003: 76). This is a process West calls 'reviving the strangeness' of the text.⁹ It also recognises that there exist potential connections between traditional African worldviews and biblical worldviews, which might facilitate original and insightful interpretations.

Maluleke argues for the same: it is necessary 'to observe and analyse the manner in which African Christians "read" and view the Bible' in their particular context, whilst being aware of 'the vastness, divisions, affinities, and diversities in Africa'. He notes that 'on the whole, and in actual practice [as opposed to in academic theology], African Christians are far more innovative and subversive in their appropriation of the Bible than they appear' (1997: 16, 7, 16). This study is oriented in a descriptive and analytical direction, in line with Maluleke's suggestion, as opposed to the advocacy stance that the majority of West's studies take.¹⁰ However, it might bear similarities to West's work in charting encounters with the Bible across history in '(Ac)claiming the (Extra)ordinary African "Reader" of the Bible', in his edited work: *Reading Other-wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities* (2007b). In the ensuing

9 <http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/webcasts/videos/conferences-classes/interviews/a-focus-on-the-details> (accessed 25.10.2012).

10 What this study does *not* attempt to do is argue the case for a particular approach to Namibian or African theology. I acknowledge the work of Justin S. Ukpong (for example, 1996), in which he advocates inculturation theology, and the work of Byang Kato (for example, 1975), who advocates discontinuity with traditional worldviews and practices and the superiority of Christianity (on the occasion conflicts arise). However, this study aims to describe the interaction between the two worldviews and to give voice to the interpretations of the Iihongo community. This study does not break into the realms of how Owambo churches *ought* to deal with the relationship between the two. To an extent, Ukpong's work on an 'inculturation biblical hermeneutic' is relevant in that this study seeks to 'read with' Ndonga culture.

chapters, I engage in the pursuit of 'a dynamic equivalent interpretation of [selected texts of] the Bible' in a northern Namibian Ndonga context. In other words, this study searches for an Ndonga community's 'Bible[s] within the Bible' (Pobee 1996: 168). In this pursuit, CBS is a significant 'parent' approach in that it is 'a locale where subjugated and incipient readings and theologies can be openly declared' (West 1996: 33). Participants are encouraged to voice their interpretations, however unusual. All of these are written down (or otherwise recorded) and, in that very process, all are (visibly) ascribed significance. This signals to the participants that all contributions are welcome, which engenders the voicing of less conformist interpretations and contributions from those less confident. As West notes, with trust – developed through spending a significant amount of time in the interpretative community – comes 'a more ambiguous and polysemic expression' than the conformist interpretations that arise initially (2003: 96).

Takatso Mofokeng states that historical-critical study of the Bible is 'the hermeneutical yoke of the oppressor' (1988: 39), in that the power rests with the textually literate expert holding the text itself and the academic resources to study and interpret it. CBS, on the other hand, involves a two-way learning process and seeks to avoid positioning the academic in a hierarchically dominant position to the members of the community participating in the study. This type of research assumes that both researcher and community have something to learn from the process, *both* bringing sources of knowledge to the study groups. With its focus on dialogue and mutual enrichment, authority is dispersed. In that it acknowledges and uses diverse cultural tools, CBS enables us 'to respectfully learn cross-culturally' and thereby avoid ethnocentrism (Dube 1996: 125). The researcher is not in a subject-object relationship with those whose interpretations are being sought and steps are taken by the researcher to avoid dominating the forum of discussion; rather, they should function as a facilitator. The differences in perspectives between the researcher-facilitator and the other participants, as well as the interpretations they engender, are to be celebrated and shown 'honor' (Patte 2002), assisting as they do in seeing biblical texts afresh, through the eyes of another. In this way, 'difference enables' (West 1996: 25) and the 'absolutization' of any given interpretation (and the alienation of others that this generates) is avoided (Patte 1995a: 83). Indeed, Eric Anum argues that an 'Afrocentric' hermeneutical approach, taking African traditional culture into account is most appropriate (2007: 7). I would argue that this study will embrace that requirement, focusing as it does on Ndonga traditional religion, culture, literature and local voices as both subjects of and aids to the interpretation of biblical texts.

The CBS process has the additional benefit of being an ideal tool to generate readings particular to communities and thereby ‘read communities’ (Lawrence 2009: 38) themselves. As a process, it encourages reflection on experience, remembering, and ‘liberating the personal and collective stories of readers’ (Lawrence 2009: 133). In the present case, this is a key means through which I might examine the relationship between ATR and Christianity in Ondonga. Maluleke argues that ‘Black and African theologies must redraft and problematise their relationship with the Bible as well as its place in African Christianity.’ He goes on to emphasise the need to take greater account of the richness of African traditional culture and religion in formulating Christianity (or, -ies?) and theologies appropriate for Africans today (1996: 12). And, as Dube notes, Western Christianity was ‘prepackaged and imported to the colonies and expected to be a good fit universally’ (1996: 111–12). Implied here is the fact that it was not; hence, we would expect aspects of pre-Christian worldviews to remain and it to be of value to investigate the contribution that those aspects make, not least to biblical interpretation. CBS, as a starting point, is ideally suited to this task: it is a research methodology which engages the community directly and which challenges the ‘global structures of dominance’ reflected in the chasm between the biblical scholar and the grassroots reader (West & Dube 1996b: 12).

In summary, the characteristics of CBS that adopted by the CCBIGs approach are: its focus on grassroots interpreters; its ethics of dialogue, collaboration and dispersed authority; its search for innovative, subversive, contextual, and polysemic interpretations; and its provision of opportunities for cross-cultural learning and windows onto local contexts and realities.

2.2 *Critiques of Contextual Bible Study*

The above benefits notwithstanding, criticisms have been levelled at CBS. Maluleke has levelled at West’s work the accusation that the resulting work is nothing but ‘academic rhetoric’, remaining as it does removed from the arena of grassroots theology (2000: 94). However, West notes that the communities in which he has worked do not express particular interest in reading the results of their cooperative studies (2007a: 3). For my part, the CCBIGs approach is conceived as an academic exercise from the outset. Not only that, but the participants might gain critical skills and ownership of the text (as West argues) alongside the opportunity for the valuation and recovery of heritage in the context of a historical (and ongoing) ‘struggle for cultural survival’ (Dube 2012: 4).

Maluleke also critiques West's choice of categories: the 'trained' and 'ordinary' reader. Maluleke would foreground divisions of gender, race and socio-economic status, as opposed to trained versus untrained readers, the former categories being the foundations for the establishment of the latter (2000: 93–4). It is those foundations that need to be exposed, he argues, given that they were the means that the apartheid regime used to manipulate society, resulting in the distinction between the trained and untrained. John Riches further highlights problems with West's categories, stressing that the clear division West maintains may not be so clear after all: academics remain 'members of a community of readers' and non-academics 'are not wholly untutored in readerly skills' (1996: 186). Additionally, Patte notes that all critical readings originate in ordinary, 'intuitive' readings but uses this point to stress the non-hierarchical ideal of recognising readings on both sides to be legitimate (1995: 102–5).

A further problematic element is the difficulty in mitigating the effect of the researcher's presence (and that of any church officials) in the process (Dube 1996: 115). In order to make the participants as comfortable as possible, I chose to bring in a translator from outside of the village, and politely to request that the local pastor not attend the meetings. The tendency for participants to 'clam up', be wary of engaging with the text, and to be reticent to discuss matters 'traditional' was pronounced when their own pastor was present (in a trial session). The effect of my own presence is unavoidable, but it is crucial to be aware of this issue. I could be aware, for example, of my own 'internalized textuality' (Draper 1996: 59) and seek to cater for what is an 'oral or oral residual culture' (Draper 1996: 60) through such simple steps as reading texts aloud rather than expecting participants prefer or be able to read them to themselves. One must also be aware that the role and status of the Bible may mean that it is viewed as sacred in a 'symbolic and not literary' sense – members of the community Jonathan A. Draper encountered in Sobantu had great reverence for the Bible but 'this did not mean that they wished to read it' (1996: 65). Pobe also touches on this point when he states that 'in Africa the Bible is not just a holy book ... it contains power' and it is 'the symbol of the presence of God' (1996: 161). As a result, the researcher may encounter 'hesitation and even resistance' from members of the community when they are confronted with a process of deconstructing, analysing and probing the text for the purposes of interpretation – 'an alien and suspicious idiom'. Interpretation of the text, he notes, is seen by some as the realm of experts alone, whether clergy or scholars (Draper 1996: 65). Draper also questions whether 'the text is the same text ...

for those whose thought processes are shaped by literacy as for those still living in a residually oral culture' (1996: 61). CBS, then, may be deemed to be a textocentric approach.

It is undeniably problematic being such an outsider and some would argue that it is, in fact, ethically wrong to undertake such a study. Gloria K. Plaatjie cites Fernando F. Segovia (2000) in arguing that West's work 'risks being seen as anthropological, or as a white male doing what other white males have always done – namely, writing about and becoming an authority on black people' (Plaatjie 2001: 118). Although a white, middle-class Westerner going to reside and research in a rural black African community may seem like an overly anthropological enterprise, one could argue (as has Said) that the arena of post-colonial criticism belongs to both the colonising and colonised societies, colonialism having profoundly influenced both (Said 1993: 43–61 cited in Dube 1996: 122). As Dube states, 'a decolonizing reader strives to arrest the violence of an imperializing text by exposing its effect and seeking ways of perceiving and promoting difference' (1996: 123). It is precisely this difference that the colonial and missionary enterprises sought to suppress in Ondonga and which this study seeks to explore.

The criticism that the agenda of the researcher may to some extent determine the interpretations generated seems to me to be a very real concern. Draper mentions 'asking leading questions' (1996: 63), while Dube acknowledges that 'to some extent [they] predetermined [their] findings' due to the question selection (1996: 120). West also acknowledges that the interpretation published at the end of his research is very much his own and only informed by the community interpretations (2003: 127). This research is subject to that criticism in the sense that it will be particularly interested in finding points of contact with autochthonous culture.

Having acknowledged the above critiques, the most significant criticism that I might level at CBS (given my aims here) is the following: the confessional (liberationist) agenda of CBS (and its variants) means that although it does focus on examining biblical texts in dialogue with 'ordinary readers', it is primarily oriented toward using the Bible as an agent of social transformation, for 'liberation and life' (West 2003: 125). This has enabled its successful translation for many contexts and issues, such as tackling gender-based violence in South Africa (Nyabera & Montgomery 2007), political oppression in Latin America (Cardenal 2010), attitudes towards HIV/AIDS across Southern Africa (Dube & Kanyoro 2004), and to engagements with homeless populations in the UK (Cornwall & Nixon 2011). The value in this praxis-driven approach is

undeniable and yet, given its divergence from biblical criticism, CBS is not sufficient to decentre Biblical Studies *as an academic discipline*. As West himself has explicitly stated, CBS is not a vehicle for biblical criticism:

Contextual Bible reading is not about understanding the Bible better. The Bible is read for change. The Bible as a site of struggle itself ... is wrestled with (or re-read) until it contributes to real, substantive, systemic change.

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In this regard, CBS has a liberation-focused, confessional agenda and does not privilege biblical criticism or, at least, not in the first instance. It does not have as its primary focus the foregrounding the 'contextual' grassroots voices in diverse cultural contexts (specifically beyond the Euro-American) for the interpretative benefits that they might offer the academy. A methodology derived from CBS with precisely that focus would be of great value, serving to highlight biblical interpretations in cross-cultural perspective and by grassroots interpreters. CCBIGs has been developed to achieve this and to contribute to Segovia's vision of cultural criticism as the next phase in Biblical Studies, which he saw in 1995 as moving us beyond historical and literary analysis (Segovia 1995). But, as has been noted, 'unfortunately, the promise of 1995 remains substantially unfulfilled' (Carey 2013: 4). Biblical Studies is still Eurocentric and the marginalisation of grassroots and so-called 'contextual' interpretations continues.

Nelson observes this trend when she argues that 'vernacular' approaches such as CBS operate in a 'ghetto', detached from the 'academic' approaches occupying the centre ground (Nelson 2014: 101). I concur that there is 'bridge-building' to be done and that a 'contrapuntal' approach is apposite (Nelson 2010: 434 and 2014: 11) – one that includes but interrogates the normative status of the 'academic' via the incorporation of the marginal voices of the 'vernacular' (Nelson 2014: 61ff.). In his pioneering work on Intercultural Hermeneutics (on the shared liberationist aims of CBS and Intercultural Hermeneutics, see West 2014), Hans de Wit also notes the beneficial nature of the encounter: 'Interpretations differ in the degree to which they are willing to learn from "strange" interpretations; the more they are willing to do so, the more valuable they are.' (2012: 22; see also De Wit and Dyk 2015). There is a need, he suggests, for 'boundary crossers' (De Wit 2012: 79). The ensuing approach has provided me, as one who occupies a 'normative' position (white, European, middle-class), with a way to cross borders – both literally and figuratively – in order to seek encounters in 'strange' interpretative 'territories'. Crucially, part of my aim is to reflect the fruits of the dialogue *back* onto professional scholarship,

thereby generating another cross-cultural encounter. In its encounter-led motivation, then, my approach shares much with De Wit's (2012: 59ff.).

This leads me to foreground an aspect of my personal location (atheism) as an important factor in how I would distinguish my approach from those above: for me, it is academic enquiry alone (with a socio-historical and cultural focus) that leads me to study biblical texts, and not confessional or liberationist interests. I am predominantly interested in the world behind the texts: what sorts of worldviews, cultures and communities might have produced them and be represented in them? This undoubtedly impacts upon my understanding of what the phrase 'understanding the Bible better' (West 2015: 240) means. 'Understanding the Bible better' may take the form of attempting to discern better the nature of the contexts that produced the texts, possible authorial intentions and audience receptions (this is indeed my interest, and what I believe West was referring to). Toward this aim, I argue that cross-cultural grassroots interpretations will bear fruit. Firstly, a given text might resonate particularly with the worldviews of interpreters in one context and thus elucidate that text for those whose contexts render it less intelligible. Furthermore, engaging with interpretations from elsewhere reveals to us the contextual nature of our own interpretations. Therefore, cultural contexts (heterogeneity being no barrier) must be recognised to be sites of 'epistemological privilege' (as liberation approaches would suggest of the poor and marginalised: West 2014) and are consigned to the 'ghetto' at our peril. To be preferred is the sense of a 'shared space' in between (Nelson 2010: 440), wherein our diverse interpretations will dialogue and perform a service of mutual interrogation and nuance.

3 Interpreting Biblical Texts with Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretations Groups: Interdisciplinary Concerns

Whilst Nelson envisages such a shared space functioning between the 'academic' and the 'vernacular', I see it operating also on a cultural level. After all, there remains a lacuna in anthropological biblical scholarship: rarely do scholars *both* immerse themselves (literally or figuratively) in the cultural contexts that they wish to 'read with' *and* engage with grassroots interpretations from those contexts in the pursuit of cross-cultural readings. This is regrettable because engaging in a genuinely holistic encounter is a powerful stimulant to reflexive biblical interpretation. The contrapuntal benefits fomented by the CCBIGs approach – as a boundary-crossing, immersive, and collaborative process, which reads both 'with' and 'within' – the reader will find in Part 2. For now, the CCBIGs approach may be set out – very simply – as follows:

Stage one of the process involves convening discussion groups, divided along demographic lines appropriate to the context. These should take into account of issues of gender, age, seniority and any additional relevant cultural sensitivities. When a CCBIG meets, questions should focus first on the cultural context and local responses to a particular theme or topic, deliberately to encourage a contextual and cultural engagement with the biblical text that will follow. The selected biblical text(s) – focused on the same theme or topic (one which the researcher thinks will find some resonance or provoke interesting discussion in this context) – is then read out loud to (or by) the group. The discussions may then be directed toward the text, what the groups understand to be happening therein, and the comparisons and contrasts that the participants find with their own context. The CCBIG interpretations should be presented first in any written analysis, so as to foreground the interpretative expertise therein. In this book, transcript extracts are, in the main, given ‘as is’, rather than tidied up or worked into my own text. This is an effort to present what happened at the meetings, and the verbatim translations of participant responses that I was given by my translator. Use of key local terminology is maximised throughout, giving primacy to the particulars of the research context, rather than my own.

Once a set of CCBIG meetings has taken place on a given text, the researcher can commence with stage two of the process: to employ ethnographic literature and participant-observation fieldwork experience in the context, in order to contextualise the responses of the participants adequately in the final analysis. The aim is to highlight prominent cultural-contextual interpretative streams in the discussions, trace ethnographic references to such, and to cross-reference with one’s own experience within the community. Much of the research into ethnographic literature on the region will likely have taken place prior to fieldwork and may have informed the choice of biblical texts for the CCBIGs. In written documents, the ethnographic contextualisation of prominent themes within the CCBIG discussions should follow the CCBIG interpretations.

Stage three of the process involves juxtaposing the interpretations of the grassroots groups with professional biblical scholarship. This is undertaken in order to illustrate what the latter might learn from the CCBIG insights, or how professional scholarship might be nuanced in some way by the cross-cultural interpretations and analyses. Key bodies of scholarship were chosen with which the CCBIG discussions seemed to generate a fruitful ‘encounter’, a lively discussion. Stage three, then, provides further levels of encounter, dialogue, and cross-cultural engagement. Multiple boundaries are crossed, including (but not limited to) those between grassroots and professional bodies

of interpretation, anthropological and biblical fields of study, and the host and researcher's cultural contexts.

Thus, the term 'Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Groups' can be used both to refer to the groups themselves, convened at stage one, as well as to the methodological process as a whole. Stages two and three (ethnographic contextualisation and juxtaposition with professional biblical scholarship) are integral phases of CCBIGs as a methodology: the ethnographic contextualisation process does justice to the particularity, diversity, and dynamism of the unique context under consideration, and engagement with professional biblical scholarship honours the interpretative insights of the groups and their contrapuntal contribution to our discipline.

3.1 *Anthropology's 'Crisis of Representation' and Reflexive Turn*

The above process indicates that there is clear boundary-crossing here, not least into the academic field of anthropology. However, whenever endeavours in biblical scholarship draw upon interdisciplinary resources – here, participant-observation fieldwork and use/creation of ethnographic resources – it is essential that careful attention is paid the most recent advances in the relevant fields. In this case, critical engagement with anthropology's 'growing pains' has been vital.

As with approaches to biblical criticism, paradigm shifts in anthropological scholarship have occurred. Clifford Geertz reports that, after 1975, 'questions multiplied rapidly about anthropology's colonial past, its orientalist biases, and the very possibility of disinterestedness or objective knowledge in the human sciences' (2002: 9; see also Geertz 2000). What resulted from this questioning was the 'crisis of representation' that anthropology has experienced in the last half-century, so termed by George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer (1986). 'Anthropology's crisis of confidence' (Spickard & Landres 2002: 10) led it to question the authority of the anthropologist-ethnographer and the status of ethnographic knowledge-claims made prior to this intellectual crisis.

Fieldwork (and the ethnographies it generated) was traditionally undertaken with the assumption that there was a clearly identifiable 'other' and a definable, non-porous 'Culture' which one could subject to investigation. The anthropologist-ethnographer was traditionally viewed as engaged in an 'heroic' enterprise and, as an impartial observer, was able to document and report back to the academy the 'facts' of that culture (Clifford 1983: 124). Ethnographic research after Bronislaw Malinowski was characterised by a stress on scientific realism, with culture to be 'defined' dispassionately, unlike the 'abuses' in cultural documentation perpetuated by missionary and colonial descriptions

(Pratt 1986: 27). However, since the 'crisis of representation' in anthropology, that such a concrete cultural 'block' exists and that external, culturally-bound language can be used to describe a foreign 'Culture' has been questioned (see, for example, Wagner 1981). The publication of James Clifford and George E. Marcus's edited volume, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford & Marcus 1986a), marked a fundamental transition in the approach to culture and its ethnographic documentation. The contributors levelled multiple criticisms at anthropology's epistemological claims, fieldwork methods and construction of ethnographic discourses.

Crucially, Clifford questions at the outset of *Writing Culture* the notion that culture is something to be objectively known and described. Rather, and as his discussion of poesis suggests, Clifford views culture as something made or creatively written, an 'invention' (Clifford & Marcus 1986b: 2, 26). He later refers to ethnographic writing as both 'allegorical' and as 'a performance', stressing its status as 'story' with morally-charged transcendent meanings (Clifford 1986: 98, 100). Stephen A. Tyler, meanwhile, refers to it in similarly creative terms, as a 'fantasy reality of a reality fantasy' (1986: 134). In their focus on the process of writing – absolutely integral to the field of anthropology – the contributors to *Writing Culture* stress that the academic output, the so-called 'representation' of culture, is nothing of the sort. In fact, the culture 'represented' is the documentation of the subjective anthropologist-ethnographer's *temporal* experience. Vincent Crapanzano makes exactly this point, too: 'ethnography is historically determined by the moment of the ethnographer's encounter with whomever he is studying' (1986: 51). This 'snapshot' experience (and the way in which it is presented) is affected by multiple factors: the perspective, agenda and identity of the researcher, the agency and agenda of the host community, the power relations between researcher and hosts, and epistemological concerns surrounding insider/outsider status. The 'unruly' experience of fieldwork, as opposed to the 'myth of fieldwork', must be worked into an ordered text; ethnography would seem to be a creative endeavour, if for that reason alone (Clifford 1983: 120, 119).

That ethnography is a writing process (by nature, creative) unavoidably affects the output, which cannot be said to be an objective account. According to Paul Ricoeur's theory of inscription, the textualisation of a speech event or discourse necessarily involves the separation of the text from the agents of discourse and the discourse itself. The discourse is, he argues, by its very nature as an event, transient. It is interpreted when it is written into text and that interpretation is what is taken away and further interpreted by an audience. The writer is therefore not capturing what happened, because the discourse

remains in that past event. This isolates the agent from the event and portrays culture as structural, thereby eliminating the performative element (Clifford 1983: 131–2). That is, individual performances are abstracted to the level of generalisations, eliminating individuality (Marcus & Cushman 1982: 42–3).

Furthermore, in the textualisation of a cross-cultural experience, the anthropologist-ethnographer necessarily *identifies* (on subjective grounds) moments of cultural ‘significance’ and then *selects* (on subjective grounds) from that grouping those events and interactions to be related to the implied audience. In so doing, the anthropologist-ethnographer has exercised his/her agency and control over the resulting text (the same can be said of extract-selection from CBS/CBIBS transcripts). What the anthropologist-ethnographer reports, then, is (in part) dictated by what strikes them as significant and is further limited by the exclusion of events and interactions which they have not seen/noticed/labelled as significant. The result is far from objective: who they are, their mastery of the vernacular, at which points they are present and absent, whom they meet and which events they choose to report on, make for a skewed ethnography. If the anthropologist-ethnographer does not explicitly acknowledge these issues as ‘limits of representation itself’ (Clifford & Marcus 1986b: 10), we might argue that his/her claim to authority (once assured simply by the ‘I was there’ motif)¹¹ is baseless.

‘As in physics, the very definitions and assumptions that shape the research process partially determine the results. Moreover, the process of observation itself alters that which we observe’ (Wilcox 2002: 54). The first part of this citation refers back to the points made above. However, the second raises a further crucial issue: If an anthropologist-ethnographer is documenting a cross-cultural encounter, a spatially and temporally limited snapshot, then s/he must acknowledge his/her own presence in the field of the encounter. J. Shawn Landres goes further in his argument that the anthropologist-ethnographer him/herself is actually a part of what is being described, a part of the ‘field’, given that they are present in the ‘snapshot’. As Landres states: ‘I am not only the writer, director, and producer of my ethnography – I am also an actor in it.’ The agency of the anthropologist-ethnographer should be recognised and ‘ought to come under the anthropological gaze’ (Landres 2002: 111). After all, the ethnography claims to describe ‘them’ and ‘their culture’, and suggests it is able to do so through the use of photographs of, interviews with, dialogues with or observations of members of the host community. These resources are

11 ‘The predominant mode of modern fieldwork authority is signalled: “You are there, because I was there” (Clifford 1983: 118).

only available as a result of a two-directional encounter and the presence in the field of the anthropologist-ethnographer. There is no interview without two agents, at least (interviewer and interviewee), and it is the encounter that forms the interview, an encounter that would never have taken place without the influence of both. As Lynn Davidman notes (and quite apart from any material influence the anthropologist-ethnographer may have brought into the community), by asking participants to offer forth their biographical narratives, the anthropologist-ethnographer has been influential: 'the telling of lives always changes those lives' (2002: 26). This is not necessarily a negative output of the ethnographic process, but it does in itself illustrate that the environment and community being studied is altered irrevocably by the anthropologist-ethnographer's presence.

A further development in anthropology and ethnographies since its self-conscious crisis of the late twentieth century is an explicit acknowledgment of so-called 'culture' as fluid, dynamic and developmental, and not as a set of fixed norms to which all individuals in a society will conform. Instead, culture may be seen as 'porous and labile' (Brown 2002: 131). Clifford argues that cultures are not to be seen as 'organically unified or traditionally continuous but rather as negotiated, present processes' (1988: 273). Indeed, even the idea of fenced and definitive societies is questionable since people are highly mobile and there remain perhaps no untouched communities anywhere in the world. Once that has been recognised, 'culture' ceases to become a 'thing' at all. As James V. Spickard has stated, the aim of a postmodern ethnography is not to reduce the encounter to an experience of a 'timeless culture', as traditional ethnographies sought to do. Every society or culture is to be seen in its historical setting and as a malleable, permeable entity. He warns against falling into the trap of 'reifying [culture] into something supposedly eternal' (2002: 243). Most interestingly for this study, ethnographic studies conducted since anthropology's paradigmatic shift have tended to focus on decolonising methodologies (such as collaborative ethnography, focused upon dialogue), which magnify polyphony and individual agency amongst the participant-contributors. The primacy of ethical considerations rightfully dictates that we should move away from the 'colonialist paradigm' and toward methodologies that respect the language, knowledge and cultural sensitivities of the host community and the diversity therein (Strong 2011: 39).

There is an explicit commitment in this study to focus on a particular community (a village rather than kingdom or region) but also to acknowledge the diversity of interpretations, commitments and worldviews within that community by including multiple and contesting voices in the study, on the understanding that 'the more views we consider, the more reason we have to be

hopeful about our conclusions' (Hufford 1995: 60). In *Writing Culture*, the authors chart the progress of ethnography through the distanced description of an essentialised 'Other' (pre-1960s), toward the incorporation of the ethnographer in the text in a 'self-reflexive' and 'confessional' style (post-1960s). They recommend polyphonic ethnography as the next developmental step (Clifford & Marcus 1986b: 14ff.). This approach acknowledges not only the subjectivity of the anthropologist-ethnographer but also the multiplicity of voices in the field and the individuality of each contributor to the project.

Dialogue is a key way in which polyphony can be achieved. Fischer and Marcus are keen to stress that their use of the term 'dialogue' is not meant in the 'literalist naïve' sense (1989: 570). Dialogue in its literal and common use means exchange of ideas or a channel of communication or conversation between two *or more* agents, as opposed to duologue, which limits the interaction to two parties. In the case of CCBIGs, dialogical interaction is conceived as a three-dimensional web of engagements. The interaction previously conceived as a linear one between researcher, on the one hand, and 'informants' as representatives of a uniform 'Culture', on the other, is therefore rejected. Instead, the focus is on dialogue literal *and* figurative, with the living *and* dead, with person, text *and* performance, with a multiplicity of cultural texts, and, finally, by no means limited to a two-way interaction.¹²

The situational and contingent nature of meaning, as recognised by post-modern scholarship (A.W. Geertz 2002: 227), is also significant. That is to say, what one understands of a text, event, dialogue or performance is subjective and interpretative. In the context of an ethnographic study, then, multiple levels of meaning and interpretation are in operation. The individual member of the host community finds meaning in and interprets his/her own cultural setting. Further, when they communicate this interpretation to the researcher, another instance of meaning-construction takes place as the researcher interprets and records the event. Yet another level of meaning creation takes place when the ethnography is read by each member of the text's audience: 'meaning is constructed (not given), multiple (not univocal), contested (not shared), and fluid (not static). And, most importantly, meaning is inscribed by readers, listeners, participants, or viewers,' explains Thomas A. Tweed (2002: 65).

12 Fischer & Marcus (1989: 570): 'The notion of polyphony or multiple voices should not be interpreted as random people the anthropologist happens to encounter, but rather points to the problem of representing systemic intracultural differences, be they competing class-linked discourses, hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses, residual-dominant-emergent discourses, or what have you – again an exercise in social analysis, not a reduction to two-person conversations.'

Another way in which the ethnography delivers only 'partial' truths (Clifford & Marcus 1986b: 7) is that the cultural encounter it documents is transient, even momentary in its broader historical context – a photographic still as opposed to a movie. However, as Spickard and Landres argue, at least 'the new anthropology has the merit of being honest – and it no longer speaks in the imperial mode' (2002: 9). 'The new ethnography speaks of "texts," "discourses," and "narratives." Rather than taking the role of omniscient narrator, it touts "reflexivity," "pluralism," "dialogue." It broods over the impossibility of its knowledge' (Spickard 2002: 239). In this way, the new ethnography to which Spickard and Landres refer has a more human-centred approach and thereby implicitly (as well as explicitly) stresses its temporal limitations.

All ethnographies are partial, not only because they reflect a transient experience of a way of life but also because what has been included (and excluded) in the final text, a redaction, necessarily prevents them from being whole. This is determined by, among other factors, the elective disclosure and retention of information by the hosts, and the discrimination between supposedly useful and superfluous information by the anthropologist-ethnographer. Furthermore, Davidman suggests that an ethnography may be considered 'partial' because of the biographical nature of ethnographical discourse in which identity-construction is a gradual process (2002: 19).

If even a comprehensive ethnography is partial, then the ethnographic elements of the current project are even more so: this study has only an ethnographic backdrop and is heavily reliant on ethnographic literature. More significantly, however, is the partiality and poesis attributable to the missionary ethnographies upon which a great deal of Owambo cultural studies is based. With the early missionaries attempting to document a fixed and bounded 'Owambo Culture', and not having heightened awareness of their own influence on the ethnographic output, the resulting sources are to be used with care. They may have been unconsciously seeking univocal contributions and filtering out dissonant articulations of aspects of culture. It is unlikely that they reflected on the profiles of their 'informants' (or sought out a balanced sample across ages and genders): most of their information would likely have come from converts whose perspectives on local culture may well have been distinctly negative.

By contrast, this study recognises that culture is not fixed: it is dynamic and is experienced and perceived differently by individuals and according to age and gender (amongst other variables). As a result, I do not seek precisely to discern or describe 'Ndonga culture' (*omuthigululwakalo gwaaNgonga*), and I actively seek a variety of perspectives at every turn, working with groups of men (*Ootate*), women (*Oomeme*), and children (*Aanona*), and noting discordant

responses (inter- and intra-group), including perceptions of Ndonga culture that do not accord with my own, largely academic understanding of the context.

In summary, anthropology's 'crisis of representation' engendered recognition of the following key points: there is neither such thing as a static, monolithic 'Culture' that can be represented, nor an objective observer-reporter in the anthropologist-ethnographer. Rather, cultural contexts are fluid and heterogeneous and should be 'evoked' ('evocation is non-representational' [Tyler 1986: 129]) in collaboration with the polyphonic interpretative voices of participants within cultural contexts, whose agency and performance should be highlighted. The subjectivity of the researcher, as well as their influence on – and participation in – the field, should be acknowledged and foregrounded. Thus, postmodern, reflexive anthropological research rests on key pillars of dialogue, polyvocality, acknowledgement of subjectivity, and 'dispersed authority' (Marcus & Cushman 1982: 43). Ethnographic outputs, for their part, are recognised to be creative, partial accounts of transient, intersubjective encounters.

In that, there is to be found considerable complementarity between anthropology and CBS: both share a post-structuralist outlook, regarding knowledge as 'culturally situated' with a 'human quality' (Hufford 1995: 59). Elements and concerns of the two may therefore combine in an approach that seeks to contribute to the democratisation of biblical studies. There is the potential to elevate contextual voices into a position of interpretative primacy, adequately contextualised within their particular cultural contexts. Just as I hope that the interpretations returned from the CBS-inspired sessions will allow me to reflect on my own understandings of the biblical passages (and those of the academic community), so I hope, too, that participant-observation in the community will allow for a reflexive approach to the ethnographic elements of my endeavour. However, whilst searching for a 'cross-cultural' perspective, appropriate recognition must be given to the fact that the context is not fixed but fluid, not subject to representation but only evocation, and that I am – as the researcher – part of the field of enquiry.

4 Conclusions

I have suggested here that Western scholarship, ideologies, and worldviews overly influence the field of Biblical Studies. However, there have been efforts to decentre and diversify the discipline, notably in cross-cultural analyses. Although such approaches are undeniably valuable, there remains a problem

with privileged scholars seeking to position themselves as ambassadors or representatives of grassroots communities (whether they originate in those settings or not); it is less than ideal to 'speak for' a community, especially given the pervasive influence of Western education on the scholars' interpretations or interpretative methods. The CBS process, on the other hand, actively engages 'popular' analyses and takes a commendable bottom-up approach in foregrounding grassroots voices; however, it has a confessional and liberationist agenda and therefore does not prioritise alternative worldviews or biblical criticism.

The methodological rationale that I have advanced here – that of CCBIGS – offers a modicum of innovation. By focusing on cultural context *alongside* the interpretative voices from within that context, a biblical scholar is able to explore and analyse, in an interdisciplinary fashion, a (dynamic) cultural context and (polyvocal) grassroots interpretations of biblical texts from that context simultaneously. In this case, such an approach has enabled me to generate interpretations (but not representations) of the cultural 'script(s)' – the ways in which ATR interacts with Christianity in Ondonga – alongside interpretations of a selection of New Testament texts, achieving both of these outcomes in dialogue with grassroots participants.

This approach attempts not only to learn *about* and *from* other cultural settings but also to learn *with* communities in those cultural settings, with the ultimate aim of fostering fresh possible interpretations of biblical texts. It seeks to promote the cross-cultural interpretations of grassroots communities by offering and reflecting on their interpretations, rather than speaking for them. Sensitive ethnographic contextualisation is sought to highlight the particularism of the encounter – alert to the perils of anthropological research identified in its reflexive turn – and a liberationist agenda avoided. Juxtaposition of the grassroots interpretations with professional biblical scholarship also serves the cross-cultural agenda, both literally and metaphorically, and serves to highly innovative streams of interpretation therein. Ultimately, I would hope, this encounter-focused, dialogical approach, which thrives on culture shock, might contribute to the diversification of Biblical Studies as a discipline, as well as highlighting the highly contextual nature of the (supposedly) 'rational' and 'impartial' interpretations emanating from the Western (and Western-influenced) academy. For, just as there is no 'objective' perspective amongst anthropologist-ethnographers, there are surely no 'objective' biblical scholars (or impartial methods of biblical interpretation).

Concerning the metanarrative of this study, three methodological elements (use of ethnographic literature, participant-observation and the CCBIG meetings) serve to bring about a holistic exploration of the persistence

of autochthonous worldviews and practices in Iihongo. Investigation of missionary-ethnographic, ethnographic and socio-historical literature offers anthropological information concerning the times of the earliest missionaries to the present. In addition, a better understanding of the living context of the CCBIGs participants has been gleaned from my residency and participant-observation in the community for a 10-month period for the purposes of this study (as well as shorter subsequent visits). CCBIG sessions or individual interviews were undertaken to discuss context and interpretation of texts with over 100 community members. This was intended not only directly to discuss local culture but also to explore the ways in which autochthonous worldviews and practices informed biblical interpretation. This particular study is therefore focused, using all of the elements above, on text (interpretation of both biblical and cultural 'scripts') as well as performance (lived experience and individual agency).

In many ways, this approach seeks 'other' interpretations – it seeks out culture shock. In that regard, it may be accused of what Edward W. Said (1978) described as the tendency of Western scholars toward 'Orientalism'. Armin W. Geertz describes this as the 'cultural construction of the exotic', the tendency 'to dichotomize humanity into we-they contrasts and to essentialize the resultant "Other"' (2002: 226), who becomes a 'national character' (Marcus & Cushman 1982: 32; cf. Clifford 1983: 131–2 and C. Geertz 2002: 5) or a 'you-transformed-to-a-they' (Crapanzano 1986: 74). A focus in more recent anthropology has been the conscious move away from highlighting and, particularly, essentialising the 'Other'. Such generalisations are recognised to be reductionisms, which recognise neither the diversity within a community nor the two-way interaction that is taking place in a cross-cultural encounter. After all, the anthropologist (or, in this case, the biblical scholar) is also an 'Other' and will, at points, be the subject of the host community's interpretation (Tweed 2002: 69). Thus, the post-colonial anthropologist's (or biblical scholar's) endeavour is 'now clearly a meeting that expands both sides' (Spickard 2002: 243). For my part, I seek to focus on diversity, particularity and polyphony, not essentialism. I look for areas of commonality as much as the 'exotic'. Just as a focus on polyvocality serves the interest of presenting the heterogeneity of a cultural context, so it mitigates the dangers of essentialism. Working *with* members of the Iihongo community, I seek collaboratively to gather diverse knowledge and perspectives on this (very particular) cultural context and on the biblical texts that we discuss. The expertise, in that regard, is firmly in the hands of the local community. An extended stay in the community is required to develop an awareness of both the similarities and differences with my own way of life (reflexivity) and to establish myself as a community member and collaboration partner

(integration). The subjectivity of the individual participants should not be minimised, either. Their agency, experiences, perspectives, willingness to disclose (or lack of) all affect the information gathered. Based on all of the above, the study as a whole can claim only to offer a window onto a highly subjective, particular encounter.

With the above points in mind, and cognizant of my own interpretative agenda (itself the product of a post-Enlightenment [textocentric] context and Western biblical training), I move forward now to outline precisely what the Cross-Cultural (Grassroots) Biblical Interpretation Groups methodology looks like in practice. In essence, it is a blend of the many methods of diversification above that will draw the study away from the problems with 'objective' ethnographic study and confessionally-driven CBS, in order to deliver a community-centred, interpretation-focused, polyvocal output.

Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Groups: the Approach in Practice

The Cross-Cultural (Grassroots) Biblical Interpretation Groups (CCBIGs) methodology aims to capitalise on the benefits of the approaches explored in the preceding chapter: the cross-cultural angle employed by Dalit Interpretation (whilst cognizant of the cautions learned from anthropology's crisis of representation and reflexive turn), and the focus on collaboration and dialogue with grassroots interpreters foregrounded by CBS. The aim is to speak *with* rather than *for* others (with Spivak 1994), and to privilege culturally-informed biblical criticism over praxis. What follows is a description and explanation of each aspect of the tripartite structure with which the methodology was devised (CC-BI-Gs). That the approach is grassroots-led informs all three aspects.

1 The 'Cross-Cultural' in CCBIGs

This interpretative approach actively seeks to privilege non-Western (grassroots) settings for interpretation. For too long, Western dominance of the academy has stifled interpretative output. This methodology deliberately seeks to foreground the interpretative insights from other worldviews, aiming to bring to professional scholarship fresh interpretations and to contribute to the diversification of the interpretative body and conversation. The cross-cultural commitment suggests that collaborative interpretative endeavours across contexts might stimulate greater appreciation of the thought-worlds and life-worlds in and behind the texts (West 2003: 76).

The cross-cultural axis is led by a commitment to learn *about* in order to learn *from* other contexts. Engaging in this cross-cultural encounter involves three key elements: cultural-contextual discussions in CCBIG meetings, ethnographic research, and participant-observation fieldwork. Unless of advanced ability in the local language (which would be ideal and no doubt transform the results), a translator is required for CCBIG meetings.

CCBIG sessions begin by focusing on local attitudes/practices/beliefs in respect of a particular theme or themes. This grounds the ensuing discussions in the 'local' highlights the diversities of perception in a context. Thereby, the resultant interpretations of the text will be oriented toward the cultural rather

than the theological, for example. Furthermore, this approach cements the status of the participants as the fonts of expertise and instills confidence in the group. For example, if the chosen biblical text has focus on spirits and exorcism, the facilitator should open discussions by asking the participants about local views/practices concerning spirits (types, characteristics, activities, and so on), the spirit-afflicted, and healing those with spirits. Participants should be encouraged to reference autochthonous/indigenous culture and traditions. If the theme is potentially sensitive or taboo, it may be necessary to reassure the participants that non-personal responses are equally welcome. By way of example, the cultural-contextual questions below were used in CCBIG meetings on the Gerasene Demoniac (Luke 8:26–39):

What is an *ompwidhuli* [demon, Luke 8:27, NRSV/GNT English] and where do they come from?

Do people in your context experience *oompwidhuli* today?

How do people with *oompwidhuli* behave?

What characteristics do burial sites and the wilderness have in your context?

I have been told about places in the landscape that have a spirit presence. Are you aware of these?

The second cross-cultural element is that the researcher will need to conduct a thorough survey of ethnographic literature on the area, focusing in particular on the chosen themes. It is crucial to situate the interpretations returned in CCBIG sessions in their own particular contextual realities. After all, the CCBIG method expressly does not suggest that contexts and worldviews on which it draws are the same as those that generated (or are represented in) the texts. There may be perceived similarities – either deliberately drawn upon or which arise from the process itself – but it is important to distance the CCBIG method from historical scholarly attempts to paint certain contemporary societies as ‘primitive’ and therefore as providing straightforwardly comparative contexts for biblical societies (see Rogerson 2001).

The third and final cross-cultural element is that the researcher will engage their own observations from participation in the community to supplement the information returned by CCBIG sessions and ethnographic literature. Fieldwork is crucial in gaining an appreciation of a *particular* and dynamic context (rejecting a model-based, generalised approach), although it is undoubtedly a ‘messy’ and ‘unruly’ experience (McCarthy 1992: 639 and Clifford 1983: 120, respectively). Certainly, it comes with various hurdles and challenges. In their absence, for example, I became acutely aware of my (over-)reliance

on computer-based and electricity-/internet-driven research. At times, I also struggled with a sense of isolation – it was, indeed, a culture shock. Positively, however, the former issue heightened my focus on focus on a hand-written journal (documenting, in particular, aspects of the Ndonga way of life with which I was unfamiliar) and the latter prompted me to dedicate more time to improving my language skills (and, thereby, my ability to integrate) by attending classes in the village school. No matter what the challenges, residing in the community, as opposed to visiting in order to conduct CBS/CCBIG sessions, undoubtedly heightens the level of trust the community has in the researcher and facilitates a greater degree of open and frank discussion.

All three of the above elements lay the foundations for productive dialogues about biblical texts, and for adequate and sensitive contextualisation of the resulting interpretations, thereby according respect to the particularity of the context.

2 The 'Biblical Interpretation' in CCBIGs

This methodology focuses on biblical criticism as its primary aim, and has no confessional agenda built into its fabric. It is, *contra* CBS, 'about understanding the Bible better' (West 2015: 240). Insights from grassroots readers in diverse cultural contexts (and in all their diversity within particular contexts) are positively valued for their own sake. That is, they are valued not only for their reflections on their own context, biblical texts, and (if the researcher so chooses) the interpretations of professional biblical scholars, but also because they offer insight into the reception of a text in a particular setting.

Having explored the theme in cultural context (as above), the CCBIG participants are invited to turn to a text (which shares the same theme). It is recommended that the text is read aloud by the facilitator, translator, or a volunteer from amongst the participants, because not every participant may be textually literate, and some may simply prefer to listen to the narrative. Participants are asked to consider whether textual themes and events cohere with their world-views and practices. The rest of the session involves direct questions about the text(s), and efforts to find and share comparisons or contrasts with the local context. In Iihongo, the participants expressly stated that they preferred direct questions, rather than a generalised 'what do you think about the text?' approach, so we operated as a whole group. However, it would be equally possible to break off into small groups with a focus question(s) and then regroup for responses. Having gathered the responses to the text, it is then the responsibility of the researcher to analyse them alongside the ethnographic and

fieldwork-based resources (including the culturally-focused discussions at the outset of the CCBIG sessions).

These textual questions were used in CCBIG meetings on the Gerasene Demoniac (Luke 8:26–39):

Why does the *ompwidhuli* take the man into the wilderness?

Why would the man be staying in a burial site?

Why is the man naked?

Why does the man throw himself at Jesus' feet?

What comparisons and contrasts do you notice between your context and the text?

When it comes to writing up the results of the CCBIG sessions, a further effort is made to foreground the expertise of the grassroots interpreters. Drawing on the ethics of CBS, CCBIG's 'parent' approach, it is appropriate to introduce the interpretative insights of the CCBIGs in the first instance, in order to foreground their value in their own right (West 1993). This is followed by (or interwoven with, as in Chapter 5) the ethnographic contextualisation. The 'conversation' with professional biblical scholarship is the final stage.

The 'culture shock' involved in engaging with another cultural context in this way should act as a stimulant to view texts, scholarship, and one's own context afresh. In this regard, one is learning *from* the context and the expertise therein. Espousing the spirit of reflexivity entails bringing the cross-cultural biblical interpretations into dialogue with professional biblical scholarship, highlighting the ways in which those voices, too, are contextually-informed and might be challenged and/or nuanced. This forms a final axis of encounter and dialogue and is presented to the reader after the CCBIG interpretations and contextualisation.

On a practical level, engaging grassroots interpreters in a given context (whether it is one's own or another cultural context) requires careful planning. Useful guidance is available from CBS manuals (West 1993 and Riches 2010), which I chose to adapt to my own ends, emphasising the cross-cultural dynamic and playing down the emphasis on social action. Despite not having a specific focus on social action, there are, nonetheless, inherent benefits from participation in such a process, in terms of both education and empowerment. In practice, participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity for Bible study, no matter what my focus was.

Because I did not focus on the transformational aspect of CBS, I rejected the call from CBS to encourage the groups to select their own texts for discussion. Instead, text selection was of my own choosing and reflected themes that I

wished to explore (bodies, spirits, landscapes), informed by ethnographic research on the cultural context. I adopted the role of questioner, rather than offering my own interpretations. I would, however, use examples from my own context to prompt comparison and contrast in worldviews, and offer possible understandings of aspects of the text if asked to do so. I also chose opportunities to offer aspects of scholarly understanding of particular texts in order to engage the participants in constructive critique of such interpretations. In all of these regards – as recommended by the CBS approach – I sought only to facilitate discussion (in partnership with my translator, who only enriched the discussions by posing his own insightful questions to the groups).

Over the course of the project, I conducted sessions on a total of 8 texts (one of which was a practice text, in order to test out the approach). I concluded the programme with a summary session, tying up loose ends and focusing particularly on cultural-contextual rather than textual questions. Text selection was somewhat experimental but focused on three themes (space and place, food and body, and spirits), each of which reflected emergent areas in New Testament studies, prominent areas of study in cultural anthropology and prevalent themes in Owambo ethnographies (or a combination thereof). Whether or not the sessions would ‘work’ – whether they would generate interpretations that would dialogue with, challenge or nuance professional bodies of interpretation (and which those bodies would be) – could not be predicted. Not all of the texts have ended up in this book. In the end, the interpretations generated dialogue with historical-critical, social-scientific, feminist, and African New Testament scholarship. This points to the organic nature of generating dialogue in this method, as well as to the unpredictable and experimental nature of dialogical methods in general (Nelson 2014: 11). My focus was on choosing texts that I hoped would resonate with the Iihongo participants; questions concerning dialogue with professional scholarship were tackled only after the bodies of interpretation had been gathered and analysed. While this approach may seem chaotic, it is a calculated attempt to encounter and learn from the unfamiliar. The location and identity of the ‘unfamiliar’ is, by its very nature, difficult to determine in advance (and is, of course, dictated by one’s own identity and positionality), but I would argue that that fact renders this approach flexible.

It is notable that certain texts brought forth greater fruit for a theme other than that with which they had originally been aligned, illustrating the unpredictability of the process and the flexibility required in the researcher. For example, whilst the Legion narrative was identified primarily as a text that would prove interesting for its focus on bodies, the CCBIG interpretations gave primacy to landscapes and that theme was itself intrinsically linked to spirits.

The Wedding Banquet texts, having been identified primarily for their links to landscapes, resulted in at least as much interpretation focused on materiality and food. These points are noted not least for their importance in rejecting the potential criticism that my choices of texts, and questions thereon, overly affected or even dictated the resulting interpretations.

I recognise that my role in designing and posing the vast majority of the questions has a huge bearing on the discussions (and therefore the biblical interpretations gleaned and the resulting study). This limitation is mitigated somewhat when one allows the discussions to take their own course, and by virtue of the presence of a translator from the area (who can point to areas of particular interest, given their own expertise on local worldviews). In so saying, one must be open to the organic development of CCBIG discussions. On a related note, it served me well to seek out a translator from the local area, but not from the precise village in which I was living; this measure of social distance allowed for a greater level of openness in group sessions.

3 The 'Groups' in CCBIGs

This methodological approach focuses on dialogue (both with and beyond the groups) as a powerful interpretative tool. Dialogue offers the opportunity to examine one's own (and others') interpretations more critically when presented with those of one's dialogue partners. This effects a triangular model, with its perspectival points focused on (a) (ethnographically-contextualised) grassroots interpretations, (b) the CCBIG-facilitating scholar's interpretations, and (c) other interpretations, whether scholarly or not, both Non-Western and Western. In particular, a valuable conversation is struck up between grassroots/vernacular interpretations and professional biblical scholarship.

In addition, just as the previous points (Cross-Cultural; Biblical Interpretation) aim for diversification within Biblical Studies, so interpreting in groups reflects an express interest in generating a range of interpretations. Any given context is particular and dynamic, and people within it will have a range of engagements with the texts, rather than speaking in a generic 'Namibian' or 'African' voice. This approach explicitly attempts to recognise the diversity of living, grassroots interpretative voices, unmediated as far as possible, and voicing interpretations of their own context(s) and the texts.

In order to emphasise to the participants that I considered them to be the fonts of expertise, and to disperse authority within the groups, I opened each session with the following statement:

My project involves finding out about how people in the Iihongo community interpret biblical texts. I am interested in your understanding of the text and how your life experience and culture relate to the text. Please feel comfortable to offer any contribution you would like to. There is no right answer and no wrong answer. All of your thoughts will be much appreciated. I hope we can have an open discussion. You are the experts here and I hope that together we can arrive at an Iihongo-centred understanding of the texts we look at.

As is indicated by this statement, the focus on 'interpretation-as-meaning-extraction' is mine. I do not mean to suggest that individuals' or the community's sole interest in or engagement with a text is in extracting its meaning in this way. Within our discussions, we also examined the various roles, uses and status of the Bible, such as occasions when it might operate as an object of power, or a moral guide alongside Ndonga culture.

Structuring the interpretative endeavour in groups necessitates allowing for social realities within the cross-cultural context. Out of respect for the gendered and gerontocratic nature of the community in which the fieldwork was conducted, I chose (in consultation with local authority figures) to invite participation in either a women's group, a men's group, or a children's group, with the same foundational set of questions being used with each. Who should attend which group was left up to the community members to decide (broadly, participating children were aged between 6 and 16). In tandem with the privileging of vernacular interpretations, the vernacular language was given primacy: discussions took place in *Oshindonga*, which both allowed for a freer discussion and foregrounded nuances in vocabulary and expression. Of course, a further layer of interpretation is therefore added when the contributions are rendered into English for the resulting academic output: undoubtedly, a limitation.

Contrary to my expectations, there were no existing Bible study groups for me to engage with, so this study results purely from the participation in groups convened expressly for this purpose. To that end, volunteers were invited through announcements made at church. One of the children in the home-stead assisted me in the writing of a short *Oshindonga* speech to deliver in the church to explain my project and invite participation. Thereafter, the details of each group meeting were announced at the Sunday service. Knowing the complexity of the demands on the potential volunteers (agricultural, domestic, employment, and so on), I did not ask them to commit to the whole project, but rather to attend as and when they felt inclined or were able.

Levels of attendance varied, with the children’s attendance being the highest¹ and the men’s the lowest:

TABLE 1 CCBIG attendance figures

Attendance group	Minimum (Single session)	Maximum (Single session)	Individuals attending one session or more
Women	2	9	25
Men	1	2	3 (+ translator)
Children	10	53	78 (approx.)
Total	/	/	107 (approx.)

TABLE 2 CCBIG verbal contribution figures

Attendance & active participation group	Individuals attending one session or more	Attendees offering verbal contribution (in one session or more)
Women	25	24
Men	3 (+1)	3 (+1)
Children	78 (approx.)	48
Total	107 (approx.)	76

The sessions were held at a fixed time (chosen in consultation with the pastor) and on a fixed day of the week. All meetings took place in the church – the community hub and geographical centre of the dispersed village, which had the additional benefits of offering seating, shelter and electricity. In any given

1 The number of children attending is approximate due to the fact that a number of children attended at least one session but did not offer verbal contributions. In one session alone (Luke 8:26–29), 31 children attended but did not contribute (although some of these may have contributed in other sessions). Furthermore, children would frequently leave sessions early, join late, or leave and rejoin sessions. This became even more complicated during school holidays, when children who spent term time elsewhere would join, whilst regular attendees would have gone elsewhere. It was not possible to monitor who was visiting the area, who was joining late or rejoining, at the same time as focusing on the content of the session, so I cannot pin down exact numbers of attendees in the children’s groups. I have estimated that, across all of the sessions, 30 extra children attended over and above those who contributed. Numbers of children who offered verbal contributions, on the other hand, are precise.

month, three weeks were taken up by CCBIG sessions, with a spare week to absorb unforeseen rescheduling, preparation of the next month's meetings, and writing up of the monthly analysis. No incentives to take part in the project were offered, although refreshments for the volunteers were provided. There was a chance to relax and have refreshments as we waited for the participants to convene. It was also important to make time for extended greetings, essential in this context.

It is important that CCBIG sessions are private, such that the participants feel absolutely assured that their contributions will remain 'safe' within the group and so that they feel comfortable discussing 'traditional' and cultural matters. In that regards, it was necessary to ask the Iihongo pastor not to attend CCBIG sessions because the presence of (their most significant member of) church 'authority' may otherwise have signalled that unorthodox contributions were not welcome. The pastor also had significantly higher levels of biblical literacy than the 'ordinary readers' in the groups, being theologically trained. This, as a form of power, may have dissuaded others from offering contributions.

4 Limitations

Despite the potential benefits of the CCBIGS approach, there are necessarily accompanying notes of caution. Just as I am attempting to employ CBS in a purposive way, so the grassroots interpretations offered here and their ethnographic contextualisation are subject to that purposive influence. As is discussed above, it has long been recognised in anthropological circles that one cannot 'represent' another culture; culture is not fixed or monolithic in the first place (hence I trace resonance with, evolution of, and diversion away from beliefs and practices documented in the ethnographic record). For its part, the fieldwork experience is temporally and perspectively limited: it is merely a subjective snapshot of a field that the researcher has altered by their very presence, a critique applicable to my own work (ethnographic participant observation and CCBIGS) and the ethnographic literature utilised herein. Attempts to describe the supposedly bounded 'culture' that ethnographers engage with will, therefore, be a form of *'poesis'*, an 'invention' (Clifford & Marcus 1986: 2, 26). Furthermore, the influence I exerted in the gathering of these interpretations and ethnographic contextualisation must be acknowledged: there are considerable power dynamics at play when a white, Western scholar asks grassroots groups in northern Namibia for their reflections on contexts and texts. I cannot know the extent to which the discussions were affected by participants

telling me what they felt that I wanted to hear, for example, or withholding what they felt that I ought not to know. What we discussed was steered by me and dictated to a large extent by my own interests and perspectives on the context. My gender, too, will have played its part: did only three men participate in the study because I am a female researcher? These factors all contribute to the fact that I would not claim to offer (or ever be able to offer) a fully nuanced and comprehensive account of the worldviews and practices in the context considered. However, none of these critiques render the resulting interpretations invalid. They are limitations, indeed, and reflexivity dictates that they be acknowledged, but the contextualised interpretations remain enormously valuable.

It is necessary to acknowledge the imbalance in number and profile of participants in this study's CCBIGS programme: the group composition is skewed towards female participation, with 25 women and only 3 men. Of the 48 children who offered verbal contributions, 35 were girls and 13 were boys. These statistics may, of course, reflect my own profile as a female researcher (and the fact that, having attended school, the children were more familiar with me than the adults). Of the women, over half (14/25) were of senior status. All three men were of senior status; there is no representation of younger, lower- or mid-status adult males. The fact that one or (maximum) two men attended any given CCBIG session indicates that the discussion cannot be deemed in any way representative and nor does it deliver extensively on polyvocality. However, the sessions with fewer participants offered the opportunity to go into greater detail and, thus, I had extensive discussions with the adult groups that were not possible with the children. Other sessions (across the groups) were disrupted because the participants had more pressing issues to attend to (the harvest, pension collection, and village administration for the adults, or school tests for the children).

The CCBIG sessions in this study were undertaken cooperatively with an Ndonga translator (Reverend Thomas Uushona), whose input formed an integral part of the study both as cultural guide and co-facilitator. He relayed to me in English the *Oshindonga* contributions of the participants. Clearly, this adds another layer of interpretation: what I have collected is transcripts of my translator's renderings of the participants' responses. Reverend Thomas Uushona² was, from the outset, absolutely enthusiastic in his approach to the project and in his appreciation of its aims. I am indebted to him for his encouragement and cooperation in facilitating the discussions out of which flowed valuable

2 Reverend Thomas Uushona is not the pastor for the village of Iihongo, although he knows the community well and is much respected there.

interpretations of the biblical texts. Such is his understanding of the context in which we were working that he probed areas of understanding and pursued lines of questioning that would not have occurred to me. From his questions arose answers that I alone could not have hoped to expect from the groups. However, whilst the responses recorded in the transcripts are verbatim, un-'tidied' records of his translations, they must be acknowledged to be exactly that – records of translations. At times, with my rudimentary knowledge of *Oshindonga*, I was aware that these were paraphrases of the actual comments offered by the respondents. I have collected, then, records of translated comments and paraphrased comments, mediated through a translator. The contributions will surely have been altered in both their translation and, if applicable, in their truncation.

Further limitations on the conclusions that can be drawn from contributions to CCBIG sessions include the extent to which any given participant supported my attempts to probe the autochthonous worldviews, especially in connection with understandings of the Bible. It seemed to me that some participants were more comfortable than others in discussing 'traditional' or 'local' matters. This is entirely understandable when faced with the (potentially intrusive) questions of an outsider, some of which may have touched on *iidhila* (taboos) (Aarni 1982: 65). Certainly, there were some points in the discussions when no one in a group felt the desire to offer a response and I did not pursue my line of questioning on those occasions. Furthermore, the extent to which historical (and current) attempts to marginalise (or even demonise) the 'old ways' or 'old beliefs' have been internalised by the community will affect the responses in the study. It was interesting, in this regard, that the younger participants were rarely inhibited and often more forthcoming than adult groups. However, the children often discussed the experiences, instructions or stories of their elders, which were perhaps easier to reveal than first-hand experiences. It was also only in the children's groups that any of the participants requested anonymity in the transcripts. Each child (*okanona*) who did so is anonymised numerically as Okanona ANON1, Okanona ANON2, and so on.

PART 2

***Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Groups in
Ondonga, Namibia***



Material Interpretations of Wedding Parables (Matthew 22:1–14 and Luke 14:7–11)

McKittrick's study of Owamboland (2002) suggests that the introduction of Christianity fundamentally altered interpersonal networks by challenging inter-generational relationships. It was also perceived by some to be a disruption to traditional authorities. Using the Wedding Banquet texts, I wished to explore these social landscapes through the institution of *ohango* (the wedding) in Iihongo. I intended to invite discussion about the associated rituals and the relation of the contemporary wedding to the pre-Christian *ohango*. Unexpectedly, the CCBIG discussions also generated considerable interest in the bodies theme, with a particular focus on food-consumption.

Questions in CCBIG sessions requested contextual reflections on the nature of a wedding: issues of attendance, special guests, food preparation and consumption, the formation and development of social relations, enactment and transitions of statuses, as well as the role, partition, and uses of domestic space in an Ndonga *ohango*. Reflecting specifically on the text, the participants were asked to consider what they thought would be involved in the King's wedding preparations, why guests refused the invitation, how the King would feel about such refusals, the role of 'wedding clothes', and what their perceptions were of the 'best' and 'lowest' place in Luke 14:7–11.

In the ensuing discussion, I outline the material focus of the CCBIG interpretations. Contextualising these interpretations using ethnographic literature on Ndonga weddings enables me to trace aspects of continuity with pre-Christian *ohango* rituals. Those perspectives are then brought into conversation with social-scientific New Testament scholarship. In particular, the focus here is on the distinction between ceremony and ritual used by Jerome H. Neyrey (and adopted by others in the Context Group), who places meals firmly in the former category (1991a). Working with the contextualised interpretations from Iihongo, it became clear that such a clear distinction could not easily be drawn in the case of the *ohango*, which itself may suggest that interpreting the wedding parables with ritual meals in mind (as opposed to quotidian meals) may be a more appropriate approach.

1 Matthew 22:1–14 and Luke 14:7–11 in Iihongo CCBIGS

1.1 *Iihongo Perspectives on Food at the Ohango*

In considering parables of wedding banquets with members of the Iihongo community, interpretations largely focused on material provisions and the potential wastage of resources if the guests did not attend what is a large-scale, community event. In Matthew 22:4 (GNT English), the King says, ‘my bullocks and prize calves have been butchered, and everything is ready.’ This struck a chord with many of the participants, who wished to stress the importance of the material aspects of *ohango*, with particular focus on animal slaughter and food preparation for communal feasting:¹

Wilbartina Teofilus:	[The wedding in the text is] almost the same because both in the story and our community they prepare food.
Ester Nicodemus:	<i>Ohango</i> [the wedding] is the feast whereby you have to invite people and prepare food for them and then you eat together.
Memekulu Hileni Nendongo:	When there is <i>ohango</i> you have to prepare the <i>egumbo</i> [homestead] to make it at its best. Then you slaughter a cow so that the guests have meat.
Memekulu Frieda Namugongo:	One head of cattle and one goat go directly to the house of the fiancée from the fiancé. Those beasts should go there to the girl's house and be killed for the wedding. And they slaughter a head of cattle then the foreleg from each animal goes to the fiancée's <i>ombushe</i> [namesake]. Other meat you cook. The ribs [<i>omapeta</i>] you take to your <i>ohagona</i> [‘second father’]. The same applies at the man's house.

¹ Respectful titles indicate the level of seniority of each adult participant, following local custom. The titles are *Meme*: ‘Mother’; *Memekulu*: ‘Grandmother’; *Tate*: ‘Father’; and *Tatekulu*: ‘Grandfather’. Children are referred to by their full names alone or, where requested, anonymised as Okanona ANON₁, Okanona ANON₂, and so on. Background shading is used in transcript extracts to distinguish between contributions from different CCBIG discussion groups (women, men, children). In this instance, comments from the children's group are followed by comments from the women's group. Extracts will only be labelled with the appropriate group and biblical text (for example, ‘Aanona CCBIG Luke 24’ or ‘Oomeme Summary Session’) when cross-referencing to discussions beyond that chapter's textual focus.

The significance of persons in particular relational status to the *aafuko* (couple) is materially highlighted by their privileged position in the food service (after the church service), as well as in the prescribed cuts of the slaughtered animals that are reserved for them to take away from the *ohango*. Food, therefore, acts as a status-indicator: ‘there is an order’ (Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo). Firstly, of significant status in this setting is an individual’s *ohegona* (‘second’ or ‘small father’). This is often the brother of the natural father. Participants reported that *oohegona* (pl.) are fed second only to the bride and groom at the feast. In addition, they are given prescribed cuts of the slaughtered animals to take away with them from the *ohango* (in this case, the *omapeta*, ribs). Secondly, it is customary for an individual to have an *ombushe* (namesake), whose attentions keep them from harm (Nampala 2006: 72, 94). The *oombushe* (pl.) of the *aafuko* (couple) are particularly special guests at an *ohango* and receive food after the couple and the *oohegona* (Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo). They are given the foreleg of each slaughtered animal to take away. These figures are sufficiently significant that they are the first to be informed (after the parents of the fiancés) of the upcoming *ohango* (Memekulu Maria Kondo).

Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo also focused on the material aspects of *ohango*, saying: ‘when you invite the guests to the wedding and they respond you become happy and prepare to serve them.’ He stated that ‘there is a lot of food at *ohango* because the cattle are slaughtered. There is goat, chicken, salad, rice, and all kinds of food.’ Further, he raised the particular importance of certain ‘traditional’ foods in the occasion:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Author: | Which foods do you think of as ‘traditional’ and which as ‘new’ to <i>ohango</i> ? |
| Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo: | Traditional food we have a lot. We have porridge [<i>oshimbombo</i>], dried vegetable [<i>omakaka</i> – disks of dried wild spinach; s. <i>ekaka</i>], marula oil and traditional beer [<i>omalovu giilya</i>]. But <i>ekaka</i> is very important in <i>ohango</i> . Because it is what the <i>aafuko</i> [couple] must eat before they eat another food. |
| Translator: | <i>Ohegona</i> serves <i>omalovu giilya</i> to the bride and groom at wedding feast table. |
| Author: | Why is that? |

- Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo: *Ekaka* is the food which is more important in traditional culture than other foods. The meaning is that a woman makes *ekaka* by pressing together [the boiled wild spinach] in the palms of her hands. This symbolises the couple being bound together.
- Translator: We have a saying: '*lya evada u vandalale*' [*Oshikwanyama*, rather than *Oshindonga*]: 'If you eat *ekaka*, you remain around your wife' – i.e. you don't stray into unfaithfulness.

This was echoed by Wilbartina Teofilus: '*Ekaka* and *oshimbombo* [are important]. Before the couple goes to the church they must eat *ekaka* and *oshimbombo* to give them luck.' Elizabeth Imbondi reported on the importance of *ondjuhwa* (chicken, locally reared and prepared): 'It is important because the *aafuko* [couple] and *ohegona* ['second father'] and *ombushe* [namesake], they have to eat *ondjuhwa*.'

That *ohango* is recognised as food-oriented raised an interesting concern with the potential wastage of food the King faced in the biblical text. Tatekulu Theophelus felt that the wedding in the story 'would not be good because the guests turned down the invitation.' Whilst this might seem obvious, he qualified his response by adding that 'the main aim was to eat the food he had prepared', hence the King's willingness 'to find any guests'. A concern with the material implications was echoed in this response:

- Memekulu Julia Iiyambo: The king was slaughtering and there was a lot of food in the house. And if the guests didn't come the food is wasting so he sent them to get people to come.

A material interpretation, then, comes with concerns for material wastage. This brings into relief the magnitude of the economic commitment entailed in staging the *ohango*.

1.2 *Ihongo Perspectives on Domestic Space at the Ohango*

At feasts, many of the important social categories such as age, rank, and gender are redefined and given continuing community significance.

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The material interpretation of the participants extended to the spatial aspects of the wedding feast and, therein, were heavily influenced by the mental map of the Ndonga *egumbo* (homestead; see Figure 1). For, just as food acts as a status-indicator at an *ohango*, so, too, does domestic space. There was much discussion about who the ‘invited guests’ (Matthew 22:3) might be and it was explained that those of particularly significant status are recognised spatially through seating areas (Ester Nicodemus). This is not an exclusive but a communal event – there are both ‘special’ and ‘ordinary’ guests. Particular areas of the *egumbo* (or extra enclosures and tents specifically set up for the occasion) are designated for the use of particularly important individuals and groups (for example, *aakulupe* [elders], suggested Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo). The *oohegona* and *oombushe* are seated in the *oshinyanga shondjugo* (yard outside the women’s sleeping area). The significance of these roles was underlined by Memekulu Maria Kondo, who stated that the *ohegona* and the *ombushe* are the first to learn about the impending wedding, once the couple have told their parents. Lastly, the *aafalikongulu* (lit. ‘carriers to the building’) are significant guests, being those who brought the individuals to the church to be baptised as babies. They now accompany the couple to the church for their marriage (Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo).



FIGURE 1 The western side of the *egumbo*

One aspect of the texts that provoked particularly interesting responses was the question of the ‘best’ and ‘lowest’ places (*iipundi ya simana* and *ehala lyokonima*, respectively), referred to in Luke 14:7–11. My reading of ‘best’ would be ‘*hypothetically* most desirable according to guest preference’ (no doubt, influenced by Western individualism!) but it quickly became clear that in an Iihongo context that reading was not the dominant understanding – what one might desire in terms of seating is beside the point. Rather, seating at a wedding is ‘already arranged’ (Memekulu Frieda Namugongo), according to one’s status at the event, and (in that sense) ‘best’ was understood as ‘in accordance’ with that arrangement, in the ‘designated’ and, therefore, ‘most appropriate’ location. However, further discussion did reveal that there were areas reserved for esteemed guests (as might be more common in the sense of a ‘top table’ seat at a Western wedding). ‘Best’ (14: 8) and ‘lowest’ places (14: 9) could be conceived of spatially and in reference to one’s place in the community or gathering, and with reference, once again, to the layout of the *egumbo*. These important zones include the *iinyanga* (yards by men’s and women’s sleeping areas), the *etsali* (‘traditional’ tent made of materials from the bush), marquees or other tents, and the *elugo* (outdoor kitchen area). The participants were unanimous in their understanding that the text meant the *ehale* (open ‘reception’ area just inside the gate [*omweelo/omiyelo*] to the *egumbo*, where visitors wait) when it spoke of the ‘lowest place’. As Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo states:

Tatekele Theophelus Iyambo: In Ondonga we have the *egumbo* [homestead] and whenever you come to *ohan-go*, don’t just go inside the *egumbo* and the buildings, just wait at the *ehale* [entrance] for the people to come and take you into the *egumbo*.

Author: What is the ‘lowest place’?

Tatekele Theophelus Iyambo: At the *ehale*.

Translator: This is where the uninvited wait hopefully!

Memekulu Hileni Nendongo’s statement about the ‘best’ place is suggestive of ‘most appropriate’ and indicates that it is the hosts who should control seating: ‘don’t sit there until someone directs you.’ Memekulu Frieda Namugongo (with no dispute from her fellow participants) echoes this interpretation: ‘the lowest place in the wedding it is only when you go there but you stay at the *ehale* [as an uninvited guest].’ Hilma Ikukutu expressed the children’s agreement with this reading, stating that the lowest place was ‘the *ehale*’, where ‘young men stand’. Hileni Iiyambo added that ‘it is also the place where dogs eat the bones.’ Wilbartina Teofilus added another zone of the *egumbo* which might be

considered a 'low' place: 'it is also when you are told to sit somewhere in the house like *omikala* [passageways]. That one is sent to the corridor (a liminal space or transitional thoroughfare), rather than given access to a designated place (for example, the women's area or the room for the elders) may be a clue to the lowly status of the *omikala*.

The enthusiasm of Iihongo community members for *ohango* (and consequent occupation of the *ehale*) meant the participants were surprised by the guests' refusal of the invitation in the narrative (v. 3: 'they did not want to come'; see also verses 5 and 6):

Memekulu Frieda Namugongo:	The difference here is that in the story the invited guests did not yet come but in our community if you are invited, you go.
Memekulu Julia Iiyambo:	If you are invited, you go to fulfill the invitation.
Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo:	In our community people like to attend <i>ohango</i> . Even if he or she is not invited, they just come!
Hileni Iiyambo:	In our tradition the invited guests would not turn down the invitation unless they could not find a good time to attend [at least part of the <i>ohango</i> , which might span three days].

The fact that the guests in the text turned down the invitation meant that 'there was no joy' (Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo); this required genuine explanation. Given the positive draw of *ohango*, a negative reason for non-attendance seemed more likely: 'maybe they are dishonest or are being disrespectful', or 'maybe it is because they are a parent and their children have not got married [a malicious/envious response?]' (both Hileni Iiyambo). The *ombala* (Royal Palace) also featured as a lens through which this aspect of the parables were interpreted:

Ester Nicodemus:	Long, long ago, stories say that former kings killed people. Maybe those people who turned down the invitation were afraid to go there [to the Royal Palace] because they think they might be killed.
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Ester's contribution (and the reflections of the children's group in response) was particularly interesting, referring as she did to historical, despotic

Owambo kings, whose activities have been well-documented by, inter alia, Märta Salokoski (2006). The *ombala* (royal palace) is a grander version of the ordinary *egumbo* (homestead). In reference to Matthew 22:2, the translator noted that 'we refer to the Royal Palace as the Kingdom', Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo having stated that the guests do not feel 'good enough' to enter. The term *oshilongo* is used in the text (meaning 'kingdom'), with which the link to the Royal Palace was made. As a result, even the Kingdom of God reference in the *Oshindonga* text has conceptual links to material place.

The connection made with the royal/ordinary *egumbo* also informed the later understanding of a guest being thrown out of the feast (Matthew 22:11–13) for not having been invited, and of occupying the 'lowest place' (Luke 14:9). The fact that the man was not wearing *oonguyo yoshituthi* (feasting clothes)² in Matthew 22:11 led Hilma Ikukutu to suggest that his clothing indicated that 'he was not invited'. Both Hileni Iiyambo and Frieda Shilemba made the point that if an invited guest arrived at a wedding but was not wearing the requisite attire, then they would not be turned away. Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo felt that 'his behaviour is different from other guests. He is not the same as other guests.' When I asked whether he meant it was more about the man's attitude than his clothing, Tatekulu Theophelus felt it did.

Overall, the interpretations gained from the three CCBIG sessions were notable for their focus on the material and spatial aspects of the text. Materially, comparisons were drawn between the joint foci of the weddings (in the text and in Iihongo) on food preparation, contextualised within household space. With this came a concern for the food wastage to be incurred if guests turned down the invitation. Turning down the invitation and the wastage that would ensue would be considered highly irregular in the current context. *Ohango* in Iihongo is extremely popular, according to the participants, not least because 'we eat delicious/nice food' (Loide Elago, Saara Maria Msati), and 'when you get home you don't have to cook' (Elizabeth Imbondi). *Ohango* is seen as a 'privilege' (Hileni Iiyambo).

Concern with spatial aspects led the participants to consider 'best' and 'lowest' places through the lens of the Ndonga *egumbo* (homestead). The *ehale* (entrance area) was deemed almost unanimously to be the 'lowest place' given in the text, being the appropriate zone for the uninvited guests and dogs. It was also potentially a threshold across which the 'invited guests' were not willing to cross, whether because it is the entrance into the palace of a violent king (Ester Nicodemus), or of a Royal Palace into which the invitee did not feel worthy of

2 One might have expected the translation to be *oonguyo yohango* (wedding clothes). It is unclear why the latter was avoided but it may relate to the pre-missionary meaning of *ohango* and the disapproval surrounding the initiation and wedding ox practices.

going (Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo). The ‘highest places’ were also conceived of mostly in spatial terms; zones of the *egumbo* provide the ‘best’ (interpreted as ‘designated’) place for different groups or for people of particular status, for example the *oombushe* (namesakes) and *oohegona* (second fathers).

It seems fair to conclude that the texts concerned were interpreted by a great many of the participants through the lens of the *egumbo* (homestead). This is perhaps unsurprising since that is the focus and location of the Ndonga *ohango* (wedding). The bride and groom process across its threshold, into the homestead comes the cattle as payment for the bride and food for the feast, and seating areas are zoned and highly prescribed. Finally, and crucially, it is the threshold of the *ehale* that the uninvited may not traverse unless beckoned in by the hosts. This collectivist, material interpretation stresses the place of the least as marginal to the *ohango* community. Spatial location, clothing and comestibles index their status: they inhabit the liminal *ehale*, they are not in the attire of the wedding party, and will necessarily get fed last, if at all. It was food, however, which was the most prominent feature of the Iihongo interpretative concern. The commitment to animal slaughter to provide for the *ohango* celebration – and the ensuing wastage (with its associated lack of joy) if the guests turned down the invitation (or did not attend) – was a pressing concern for the Iihongo interpreters.

2 Ethnographic Contextualisation

Moving forward to ethnographic contextualisation and engagement with scholarship, I particularly want to focus on the material aspects of the above interpretations. As I see it, these are focused on the following:

- i. The animals given and slaughtered for the wedding feast, wider food preparation, and concerns for poor attendance against a background of economic-material implications.
- ii. The spatial mapping of the *egumbo* as an indicator (along with allocation of food) of one's place at the *ohango* and in the wider community, i.e. one's place in a complex map of consanguineous, affinal and fictive kinship.

That the participants interpreted the story largely through a materialist lens (focusing on food and the spatial context of the *egumbo*) coheres with *ohango* as it is presented in ethnographic studies. Given the specificity and relevance of her study, I focus primarily on Maija Tuupainen's 1970 diachronic study of marriage in Ondonga in an effort to present an outline of the pre-Christian *ohango*, with which I might then find aspects of continuity in the contemporary *ohango*.

In a pre-missionary context, Ndonga marriage was understood and enacted through material media. An examination of its three stages (preparatory initiation, engagement, and the wedding feast) will demonstrate that it is through materiality – in the form of places, objects (gift and exchange), food and clothing – that a wedding is planned and realised, as well as validated (by the living community) and sanctioned (by the dead community). One's place (whether bride/groom, kin or wider community) is reaffirmed by a most material set of rituals, which involve the society in its broadest sense (including the departed). Thus, what appears to be solely a materialist reading may, upon closer analysis, be connected to cosmological concerns, as well.

2.1 *Ohango Yiitsali*

The preparatory phase of a historical wedding in Ondonga was the initiation (for males, circumcision; for females, the *ohango yiitsali* ceremony). Initiation for both groups took place at designated sites: circumcision took place at a forest site established by Nembungu, one of the founding kings of the Ondonga territory (Williams 1991: 117), whilst female initiation took place at burial sites of circumcised chiefs (Tuupainen 1970: 46). These sites indicate the liminal phase the initiands were entering into and the corresponding withdrawal from homestead and community. However, this was not withdrawal from the entire community: burial sites of chiefs, in particular, connect the living community with ancestral spirits, with those of chiefs understood to be mediators of rain and fertility for the living Aandonga (Hiltunen 1993: 78; Miettinen 2005: 65–6).

Historically, male circumcision was absent from some sectors in the Ndonga demographic and by the 1920s, McKittrick argues, it was vanishing altogether. Female initiation, on the other hand, was 'an area of indigenous Ovambo religion that remained unusually vibrant' (McKittrick 2002: 213), and which Tuupainen reports as current during her fieldwork in 1966 (1970: 101). The *ohango yiitsali* – so-called due to the bush tents (*iitsali*, *iihalala*)³ constructed for it – was a 'virtually universal' phenomenon across Owamboland, she reported. This is striking given the vehemence with which the church denounced *ohango* and tried to prevent this 'pillar of heathenism': participation entailed excommunication (sometimes permanently) and expulsion from school (Miettinen 2005: 320, 314–5). The *ohango yiitsali* ritual – characterised by physical endurance tests (dancing, physical labour, standing naked in the sun) – proved a girl was not pregnant and demonstrated that she was ready for

3 The plural *iitsali* (syn. *iihalala*) refers to 'brushwood huts in the initiation ceremony' (Tirronen 1986: 60). Its singular would be *oshitsali*. A related word, *etsali* is defined as 'Bushman hut, shelter' (Tirronen 1986: 432). Its plural would be *omatsali*.

the transition into adulthood. This is a transition Sayumi Yamakawa suggests is similarly enacted through today's *ohango* (2009: 8). Kari Miettinen explains that, historically, passing through the *ohango yiitsali* allowed the girl to marry and have 'socially acceptable children' (2005: 316). The Kwanyama equivalent, the *efundula*, still takes place, or does so in a revised form (Nampala 2006: 44).

The significance of **materiality** within the rite (and, therefore, the interaction between the material and spiritual, religious and mundane) becomes apparent when one considers how integral to its performance were the following aspects (Tuupainen 1970: 46–52):

1. The rite was conducted at ritually potent **burial sites** in order to involve the ancestors;
2. The site held temporary **huts** constructed from bush materials (*iitsali*);
3. A **black ox** was ceremonially killed. Its **blood** was sprinkled on the grave and **flesh** thrown between the grave enclosure's palisades;
4. Preparations for **feasting** were undertaken by the family;
5. Lasting one to three months, a central occupation of the girls during the initiation was **dancing**, often stopping only for meals;
6. Girls' bodies were adorned with **apotropaic amulets** and *olukula* (red ochre paste);
7. Diviner-healers (*oonganga*) prepared both protective and fertility-inducing **medicines** and **foods** for the initiands;
8. The promotion of fertility was also pursued through the chewing of certain **grains**;
9. Bodily adornment signified that a girl had passed the initiation tests: she was sprinkled with **corn flour**⁴ and wore only **leather and palm clothing** with a string of ostrich egg **beads** for richness;
10. Initiated women underwent a **fire** and **water** rite upon returning home.

Whilst Tuupainen suggests that certain modifications had taken place from the 'old marriage customs' to initiation as informants reported it in the 1960s (1970: 41ff.), her work testifies that the institution survived, just in the 'abbreviated form' known as the *efukaleko pashipagani* (pagan initiation).⁵ This altered rite, which lifted the virginity taboo and enabled the girl to move forward

4 Elsewhere, in reference to diviners, adorning the body in white in this way is said to mean that the person 'is possessed by spirits' (Hiltunen 1993: 41).

5 Nampala suggests that the last Ondonga initiation was in 1947 (2006: 41).

(socially- and cosmologically-sanctioned) into a sexual and procreative union, was relevant also to those who had undertaken a church wedding (1970: 101). Tuupainen suggests that ‘it is likely that the ancestors’ spirits do not receive much attention on the part of the witchdoctor.’ However, given the frequent reference made to the presence and lived experience of *aathithi* (ancestral spirits) by the participants in this study,⁶ Tuupainen may have been hasty in concluding that the ceremony only survived at that point as ‘a mere custom’ (1970: 100). Loide Elago, in discussion about what defines *omundonga* (an Ondonga person), referred to the couple preparing for marriage and suggested that ‘they go to the *ohegona* [second father/father’s brother] to get some ointment’ (*Aanona*, Summary Session). Erroneously, I did not follow up this comment but wonder if it relates to any of points 6, 7 or 9, above. Today, there is considerable controversy across Owamboland about the reintroduction of initiation ceremonies that has taken place (reintroduction has not taken place in Ondonga, to my knowledge), with both endorsement and rejection from different church authorities, and very public support from past presidents and senior officials (Immanuel Shinovene, *The Namibian*, 22nd and 28th August 2012).

2.2 *Okugonda*

The second element of the historical marriage (not always sequentially so) was the giving by the man (so long as his parents consented) of his *iigondo* (gifts), signifying intent to marry. A mediator would be sent to visit the *egumbo* where the girl resided to secure her consent and that of her parents. Contingent upon a positive response, he would go with the mediator to share a meal with her and her family. He would offer gifts, usually clothing and adornments: this engagement would therefore be endorsed in a particular domestic space and via the offering of gifts and a communal meal. As Tuupainen says of one of the traditional gifts, the ‘*oshimona* [a leather necklace] joins the girl with the ancestor’s [*sic*] spirits of the boy’s clan (as it is made of ox cord and the cattle is the chain between the living and deceased generations) and thus protects her from evil spirits’ (1970: 55). Once again, then, the link between the material aspects of the ritual and the ancestral spirits is apparent, albeit historical in this case, on account of the type of gift offered.

2.3 *Ohango yokutselela*

The historical marriage ‘proper’ was the *ohango yokutselela* – the marriage feast (*okutsela* = to kill an ox with a spear). Again, now that the initiated girl

6 *Aanona*, CCBIG Luke 24; *Ootate*, CCBIG Luke 24; *Oomeme*, CCBIG Mark 4:35–41 & 6:45–52; Reverend Thomas Uushona: Interview, 23.06.2015, ELCIN Headquarters, Oniipa.

was returned to domestic space (after a temporary withdrawal into the liminal wilds for *ohango yiitsali*), it is here that this phase of the marriage ritual was concentrated, although the church ceremony now precedes the feast.

Having gained further consent from the girl's family, 'he sent notice to the girl's home that he would send an ox' (Tuupainen 1970: 56). This was the *ongombe yohango* (the wedding ox). If a positive response followed, feasting preparations got underway (where she resided) and he would send the ox when prompted. Various rituals using the blood of the ox would secure fertility for the union, some of which Tuupainen suggests were still current among traditionalists in the 1960s (1970: 57). Participants in Iihongo reported that the giving and dividing the carcass of the ox was contemporary practice. Previously, the division may have been 'all according to the magic meaning of the various parts of the animal', although Tuupainen suggests that this, too, was 'a custom without religious significance' by the 1960s, perhaps because of the extreme opposition the missionary authorities exhibited toward the 'heathen' aspects of the *ongombe yohango* ritual (1970: 57, 104; cf. Miettinen 2005: 323–333). However, at least some Christians 'ignored' the missionary bans on this and the initiation ritual (Miettinen 2005: 348).

It is the *ongombe yohango* that actually ratifies the marriage: 'a very important act within the marriage alliance is the giving and slaughtering of the beast. It is believed that the shedding of blood completes the marriage tie.' This is borne out by one of Tuupainen's participant's contributions: "there is no marriage without *ongombe yohango*" (1970: 73, 62). It forms the beginning of a 'special hospitality between the kin groups' (Tuupainen 1970: 64). Whatever else its function (to offer thanks to the mother of the bride, to form strong social ties between kin groups, or to introduce the bride to the husband's ancestors: Tuupainen 1970: 73, 64, 63), it is through this very material medium that the marriage is sealed. The *egumbo*-based communal feast that the slaughtered ox provides for engenders community recognition that the kinship alliance has been formed. The blood of the ox, like the blood of the young men in circumcision, forms a line of communication to both land and ancestors (Aarni 1982: 39). Despite claims that the *ongombe yohango* is not payment for the bride (Tuupainen 1970: 58ff.), some of the participants in the present study had the following to say of it:

Translator:	At the wedding, you must give the cattle to slaughter. If you do not then the family will not let the girl marry. If I visit and you slaughter even a chicken, I feel respected.
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- Memekulu When it came to the wedding event the men used to
 Rauha Andreas: give the cattle to the family of the girl so that they can
 exchange for the girl. The blood of the cattle pays for
 the girl.
- Memekulu In our tradition, as from our forefathers, the girl
 Frieda should be exchanged with the cattle. The price for the
 Namugongo: woman is cattle. When the day of marriage comes,
 people meet the cattle [being delivered] by shouting
 'ipindi ya landa' ['we get what we bought'].

Having attended several weddings whilst conducting fieldwork for this study, I was struck by how much each wedding (referred to simply as an *ohango*) centred on the *egumbo* (of course, I acknowledge that one could say the same of a British church wedding with a reception at a non-religious location, but the ratio in terms of time would not be as notable). Whilst many attended the church, some did not, even if they were immediate relatives of the *aafuko* (couple). Of this phenomenon, Tuupainen notes the following:

That the Christian wedding ceremony, which always precedes the home feast, is not yet much valued in the minds of all Christian Ovambos, is seen in that not all of the wedding guests gathered at a girl's kraal were present at it (Lahtonen D 1967).

TUUPAINEN 1970: 103

However, given the extensive material demands of preparing a communal feast (and a homestead) for a large event that may last several days, coupled with the primacy of hospitality,⁷ the absence of close family members is understandable. In addition, the industry required to prepare the feast may well draw in people who will later be guests at the wedding. In all likelihood, those making preparations will be predominantly women (cf. Dietler & Hayden 2001a: 11). Lastly, the emphasis on acting as a witness to the wedding and being a part of the body that approves the union is culturally situated in the *egumbo*-based rituals (Ester Nicodemus expressly stated that being a witness was one of the core reasons for attending *ohango*). As Yamakawa noted in a comparison of traditional and contemporary Ndonga marriages, the 'traditional' elements

⁷ One of the driving forces for marriage is for men (Tuupainen genders this desire) to have their own kitchen (*elugo*) in order to be able to show hospitality to friends and relatives (1970: 78). Tatekulu Theophilus Iyambo referred to this change of status, too: 'after marriage, you have your own kitchen.'

are required as well as the church ceremony for the wedding to be deemed 'proper' (2008: 190 in Fairweather 2010: 181).

That the wedding is seen as an alliance between kin groups might be gathered by exchange of gift and hospitality (*ongombe yohango*, bridal clothing), as well as by the physical movement between *omagumbo* (homesteads) during the wedding rituals. Today, there are feasts at both homesteads with, for example, the father of the bride exiting the *egumbo* to head the procession of the marital couple across his homestead threshold after the church ceremony. In order to ensure an auspicious marriage for the couple, all those in attendance are expected to put aside quarrels and bad feelings for the duration of the celebrations. This is testament to a focus on positive interpersonal relationships and community harmony, wherein a metaphysical 'atmosphere' (persons extending their influence through sentiments) is understood to impact (positively or negatively) upon lived experience.⁸ A feast, here, is serving both to 'cement' existing social relationships (Crowther 2013: 152) and to generate positive new relationships.

2.4 *Ethnographic Contextualisation: Summary*

Various aspects of the wedding make reference to 'tradition' (some of which are no doubt evolved, constructed, and/or reintroduced), whilst there have been clear departures from local customs elsewhere (marriages often take place on Saturday nowadays, whereas there was previously a tradition of marrying on Thursdays [Tuupainen 1970: 103]). Ian Fairweather discusses the 'performance' of tradition at Ndonga weddings but I hesitate to affirm his conclusion that this is 'showing off' and that all of the participants are involved in 'the process of constructing a meaningful category that they call the "traditional" in opposition to the "modern"' (2003: 280). Whilst the weddings I attended *were* very much a *mélange* of 'traditional' and 'modern', 'local' and 'Western', 'then' and 'now', to reduce such a complex set of rituals involving scores of people to the level of a homogeneous performance does not do it justice. Some in attendance were certainly visiting from a cosmopolitan life in the city but, for others, encounters with 'tradition' (largely mediated through rural existence) are not mere 'visits'. Some have not experienced the break with tradition that migrant labour or permanent relocation to the city entails.

A general point of continuity with tradition is found in forms of dress and adornment: older men may carry a spear, bow or gun, whilst women carry ox tails (*omushila gwoongombe*). Many guests wear 'traditional' dress (on its hybridity, see Shigwedha 2006: 198, 234). Johannes Ikukutu noted in the

8 This perception of the agency of sentiments is also found contextually with regard to witchcraft.



FIGURE 2 Women in *oohema dhoontulo* in a gift-giving procession at *ohango*

summary session that ‘the Ndonga women wear the traditional clothes in red’, which connects to the use of bloodwood roots (*Pterocarpus*; Tirronen 1986: 150) mixed with fat and used on bodies and leather in pre-missionary times (Shigwedha 2006: 224). Nowadays, there is preference for a red, black and pink striped fabric. However, the children also noted that the ‘traditional dress’ Johannes had spoken of was not allowed in church.⁹ This was a point at which the differences between church and *egumbo*-based wedding became apparent:

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| Elizabeth Imbondi: | In traditional weddings people are exalting and dancing but in Christianity we are more singing and praying. |
| Wilbartina Teofilus: | Even the traditional dress; it is not allowed to come wearing it in the church. |
| Translator: | The red two-piece (top and bottom) and sometimes animal skins. |
| Author: | When <i>would</i> people wear that? |
| Wilbartina Teofilus: | Like in <i>ohango</i> [wedding feast]. |

⁹ This point is nuanced by Reverend Thomas Uushona’s contribution, below. Johannes’s comment may speak to the fact that forms of traditional costume were forbidden by the missionaries, as is reported in socio-historical studies (Shigwedha 2006: 176).

They were not referring to the women's full-length, 'traditional' dresses (*oohema dhoontulo* [pl.]; see Figure 2), which are welcome in church. There is then a further set of clothing that is representative of 'tradition', too. A description of the difference is as follows:

Ohema yontulo [s.] and traditional dress are totally different. *Ohema yontulo* can be in any colour according to your own choice and you can wear it anywhere. But traditional dress can be made from only cloth that is pink with black, red and white stripes and you apply a pink dye colour to sharpen the colour. This colour is for both genders. To this dress they attach the skin of wild animals, and wear a necklace made from snails that come from the sea [cowries?]. At a wedding, women wear the *oohema dhoontulo* [pl.] when they accompany the *aafuko* [couple] to the church. But after church they wear traditional dress. This dress they wear only at weddings or traditional or cultural events. The church does not decide for anyone what to wear on a wedding day; if you want to wear *ohema yontulo* you can, but it is their common sense not to wear the traditional one. *Ohema yontulo* is more likely to be worn by an adult rather than by a young one. It may indicate maturity.

REVEREND THOMAS UUSHONA Private communication, 21st August 2015

Considering points of continuity with pre-Christian wedding institutions (*ohango yiitsali*, *okugonda*, *ohango yokutselela*), Fairweather suggests that 'Aandonga would strongly reject the idea that contemporary wedding ceremonies are merely adaptations of the heathen girls' initiation ceremonies' (2010: 182). Setting aside the use of the pejorative term 'heathen', I am sure he is right in this regard. In a contemporary wedding, (at least) one area referred to as an *etsali* is constructed from bush materials and is occupied by particularly esteemed guests or 'guests from afar' (Elizabeth Imbondi). *Etsali* has, at least etymologically, links with (*ohango*) *yiitsali* but otherwise the initiation ceremony would appear to have been abandoned.

There was no mention in Iihongo, either, of the autochthonous institution of *okugonda* (gift-giving by the fiancé), although it was widely reported that a man is responsible for furnishing his bride-to-be with her material wedding needs, such as her dress. The community members bring gifts to the wedding; the majority of these were (or at least were presented in) local basketry and pottery. Such gifts might include 'mahangu or sorghum flour' (Ester Nicodemus), or wares to assist the couple in establishing their own homestead.

However, there are many examples of continuity with the *ohango yokutselela* ritual – the part of 'traditional wedding' involving the wedding ox feast.

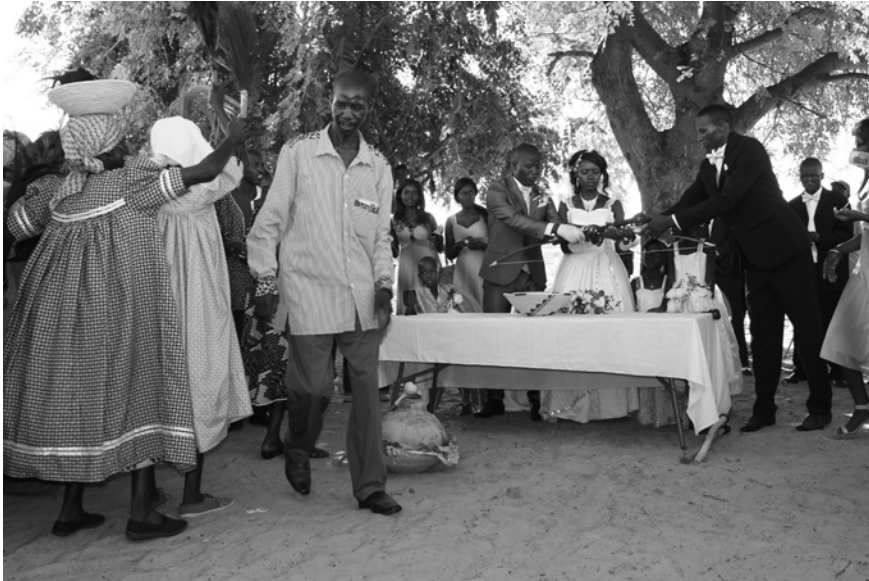


FIGURE 3 The newly-married couple (*aafuko*) receiving gifts

The term *ohango* (now meaning simply ‘wedding’) used to be used to refer to the initiation *and* the feast, with terms of qualification for each (*yiitsali* [‘of the bush-tents’] / *yokutselela* [‘of the ox slaughter’]). Only the former remained totally and permanently off-limits (for the missionary authorities). This may explain why there is little continuity today with *ohango yiitsali*, whilst elements of *ohango yokutselela* endure.

Domestic space acts as the primary material stage for the contemporary *ohango* (aside from church ceremonies), just as it did historically for the *ohango yokutselela*. On that stage, it is particularly through the delivery of a communal feast that social sanction of the union is facilitated and friendly relations with the bridegroom/bride’s family are developed and demonstrated, mirroring the situation prior to the introduction of Christianity. Foods considered ‘traditional’ are conspicuous throughout the wedding: a large gourd of traditional beer may be set in front of the bride and groom’s table (see Figure 3), and local specialities (*omakaka* [spinach] and *ondjuhwa* [chicken]) are served to particular people at particular times. The killing of the wedding ox not only validates the marriage in the eyes of the ancestors (including introducing the bride to the groom’s ancestors) but also provides the food (along with other animals) by which crucial hospitality is shown, place in the community affirmed, and envy and witchcraft averted. After all, ‘if [someone] is inhospitable he is afraid of witchcraft’ (Tuupainen 1970: 131).

Notably, it is an ox – the wedding ox (*ongombe yohango*) – that acts as the link *between* the married couple *and* acted (in the past and perhaps in contemporary times) as the means of communication to the ancestors (*aathithi*), called to sanction the initiation (in which blood and ox flesh was historically placed on the royal graves) and the wedding. It also provides the material cohesion between members of the community in general, through the wedding feast (*ohango yokutselela*): ‘The giving of *ongombe yohango* seems to have been, and still is, a very important factor in supporting of continual friendly relations between the kins and clans concerned’ (Tuupainen 1970: 64). Whether or not the religious significance of the material aspects of the wedding rituals remains the same (and it may well do, given the continued significance of the ancestors: see Chapters 5–7), Tuupainen is correct when she suggests that there may be ‘unconscious significance of the old magic beliefs’ (1970: 79). Either way, and as the Iihongo interpreters made clear, the giving and slaughter of the wedding ox remains the central feature of the marriage alliance and celebration, and particular parts of the animal are still distributed to significant figures according to customary rules deriving from *ohango yokutselela*. Many features of this autochthonous institution (rather than *ohango yiitsali* or *okugonda*) endure in the contemporary *ohango* and, therefore, informed the CCBIG interpretations of the wedding parables.

It is materiality that would appear to be key, both historically and contemporaneously, to preparing for and enacting the Ndonga wedding. This involves issues of ritual performance, as well as hospitality. Material places impart cosmological significance to initiation rituals (now obsolete in Ondonga), performed as they were at sites of ancestral potency. These were sites chosen by deceased kings or those at which they were buried: both of these would be imbued with *oonkondo* (power), either by their dedication by the king’s ritual specialists, or by the presence of the king’s body and ancestral spirit, having joined the *aathithi*. Hiltunen suggests of the ancestors: ‘if they are taken into account at the time of the most important activities (for example, moving house in the field, fetching salt, eating new grain), and they are attended to, they let their descendants live in peace and succeed’ (1993: 36). It seems fair to suggest that the initiation and wedding rituals would count amongst those ‘most important activities’.

To refuse an invite to such as wedding, then, would be to turn down hospitality, to suggest bad feelings toward the host (potentially interpreted as envy or a veiled threat of witchcraft), and to turn one’s back on being part of the communal witnessing and sanctioning of the marriage. With no community sanction, the children from the union would not be socially acceptable, either. This would upset the ‘reverse kinship’ system whereby the non-kin pair have

married (been unified through the slaughter of the *ongombe yohango*) and then further ratify their marriage by having children, which would, in turn, augment their social status and prestige (Tuupainen 1970: 73, 156, 78). Refusals to attend the *ohango* have dire consequences in many arenas: hospitality and material wastage, kin and community relations (envy and witchcraft), a lack of community sanction and upsetting of the kinship system. It is understandable that there would be 'no joy' with such refusals.

3 Iihongo Interpretations of Matthew 22:1–14 and Luke 14:7–11 in Dialogue with Social-Scientific New Testament Scholarship

3.1 *Materiality at the Wedding Banquet*

What the Iihongo interpretations highlight is the extent to which the preparations for a wedding banquet constitute a material sacrifice, contextualised by a backdrop of subsistence agro-pastoralism. Weddings involve the preparation of vast quantities and varieties of foods, not least meat(s), which are rarely eaten. Such an occasion, as the children stressed, was notable for the fact that they got to consume foods that were both delicious and in plenty – a far cry from daily existence and quotidian meals. Dennis E. Smith, too, highlights the association of feasts or banquets with luxury (1987: 623) and Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh note the 'extraordinary and singular significance' of events wherein animal slaughter is involved (2003: 354). As we see in the text, the king has slaughtered his 'oxen' and 'fat calves' (NRSV)/steers and prize calves' (GNT English). The GNT *Oshindonga* renders this 'bullocks and fattened cattle'; whether the cattle are thereby implied to be female (compromising the reproductive capacity of the herd) or simply the product of fattening 'investment' further highlights the economic implications of feast preparation and non-attendance of guests.

The Iihongo *ohango* and interpretations of the text also illustrate that the focus of scholarship on food and meals need not be polarised into studies of the material *or* the social and ritual aspects. The slaughter of the *ongombe yohango* forms a series of connections with wider social networks (alliances between families, prompting social sanction of the union and making connections with ancestral spirits). In this regard, the material, social and cosmological aspects are not easily disentangled. The *ongombe yohango* is not purely material (nutritional) but nor is it purely symbolic (providing a link with deceased community). A material focus certainly draws us back to the lived experience of communal feasting and its connections to the wider cosmological framework.

3.2 *Status at the Wedding Banquet*

Food is a social substance and a currency. What one is able (and chooses) to serve expresses one's own position and helps to define one's relationship to others. What you, the guest, are offered, is a measure of your standing in the eyes of society and your host.

PERVO 1985: 311

Further to the material considerations involved in wedding feast, there are also issues of status and reputation within the community. The host gains from his material sacrifice the recognition and honour of having provided lavishly for the guests (either in quantity or quality, or both). This conforms to Neyrey's assessment of the institution of patronage (1991a: 373, something he links with meals in his *Reader's Guide*: 4.3.5). Indeed, in a setting of 'limited good' and the invidious gaze (see Elliott 1991a, 1992 and 1994),¹⁰ such an occasion is surely one in which to perform one's status whilst avoiding envy for the luxury on display (by generously sharing that luxury). In Iihongo, a wedding feast is an opportunity to host a wide spectrum of guests and to overtly demonstrate one's hospitality and generosity to those present.¹¹ This may be for the reputational gain that ensues (along the lines of the 'honour' model of the Context Group) but is more likely index-linked to the valuation of hospitality as a core moral value in this setting. Ingesting the 'shared substance' binds the community and promotes positive relationships, for their own sake (Sutton 2001: 50–53, 160).

10 The evil eye (motivated by envy) is culturally contextualised by the notion of 'limited good' (for example, Malina 2001a: 81–107), and the 'pan-human phenomenon' of envy (Foster et al. 1972: 165). That is, in a context where all goods are understood to be finite, one person's gain is another's loss, thus generating envious feelings. Anselm C. Hagedorn and Jerome H. Neyrey refer to John 3:3 as an example of this worldview: 'He must increase, I must decrease' (1998: 21). Tactics for warding off the envy of others include *concealment* of wealth (goods, livestock, women, children), *denial* of good fortune, the "*sop*" (symbolic sharing), and *true sharing* (Foster et al.'s categories: 1972: 175–82). That Owamboland is a context concerned with 'limited good' and envy is suggested in oral literature. For example, limited resources include butter and frogs, with the former used symbolically in a Kwanyama rain song: 'Her {the rain's} butter is the frog' (Estermann 1976: 172). Proverbs indicate envy to be a concern: '*Nefukutu nopiikulya nge tayi liwa*. Envious at mealtime, while eating. (A covetous person is never satisfied)' (Kuusi 1970: 26; see also 1970: 31, 50, 237–9).

11 If within an exclusive feasting group, this would be termed 'redistribution'. However, the fact that guests bring contributions offsets the competitive edge of this transaction and it may therefore combine with elements of balanced reciprocity (Crowther 2013: 159–60). Still, there is an element of 'gastro-politics' involved (Appadurai 1981). Crowther acknowledges that the feasting typology is not fixed (2013: 174).

Looking to the four strategies for averting the evil eye that Foster et al. identify (symbolic sharing, true sharing, denial, concealment [1972: 175–82]), it seems that in a wedding setting, sharing is the only option open. However, if one shares with the ‘have nots’, whose envy John H. Elliott, amongst others, identifies as the source of the evil eye (see Elliott 1991a: 149), then one is not adhering to the ‘like eats with like’ aspect of the meal model that Neyrey expounds for New Testament settings (*Reader’s Guide*). Perhaps he might argue that concealment would therefore be the tactic for erecting a barrier to the evil eye. On this basis, however, a wedding feast would have to be an entirely private affair (inherently contradictory, perhaps), not matching the description of a luxurious meal eaten by the elite (‘haves’) but prepared and served by slaves (‘have nots’) (Neyrey 1991a: 364). Nancy Evans offers evidence, too, of ‘rowdy [public] processions’ after ‘private’ feasts (2012: 151), which might provoke the envy of the wider community. Would there not be occasions upon which the wealthy landowners would exhibit marked generosity to those beneath their status to diffuse such tensions?

Meals in antiquity were what anthropologists call “ceremonies.” Unlike “rituals,” which confirm a change of status, ceremonies are regular and predictable events in which roles and statuses in a community are affirmed or legitimated. In other words, the microcosm of the meal is parallel to the macrocosm of everyday social relations.

MALINA & ROHRBAUGH 2003: 381

Reflecting on the quotation above, the texts under consideration in this chapter – set against the backdrop of an Ndonga wedding – present an interesting interplay between ceremony and ritual. As elucidated in the foregoing section, the Ndonga wedding feast (a meal, of course) performs the function of both ritual *and* ceremony. It is not, as with a British Christian wedding, limited to the *celebration and recognition* of the status transformation of the couple that has earlier occurred in church. The feast is the partner element to the ritual slaughter of the wedding ox (*ongombe yohango*); neither fulfills the ritual element without the other because that particular animal must be (i) given, (ii) slaughtered, and (iii) consumed at its associated wedding feast. Via their very attendance (and co-efficient sanction of the union), community members are participating in the ritual through which the status of the marital couple (*aafuko*) is transformed. However, in the descriptions of the *ohango* by the participants, the meal (and the associated interpretations of the feasts in Matthew 22 and Luke 14) also presents a setting in which the food service and spatial organisation of guests serve to affirm their (unchanging) statuses. In

this sense, it does what Mary Douglas argues all meals do: they constantly reference other meals (1972).

Is it necessary to conclude (with Neyrey 1991a) that meals in antiquity were always and only ‘ceremonies’ in which statuses were affirmed, cases of ‘like eats with like’ (Neyrey: *Reader’s Guide*: 4.2 and 4.3.2)? Is it not possible, too, that a *request* to sit next to the ‘right hand’ (Mark 10:37) and an *invitation* by a host to ‘move up higher’ (Luke 14:10) signal the potential for status transformation *through* participation in a meal? Whilst I do not seek here to ascertain the nature of meals in an early Christian setting, the issue is pertinent to the interpretation of the parables, as the metaphorical narrative must speak to the parable audience’s lived experience. Smith’s treatment of table fellowship as a Lukan literary motif certainly notes that placing and status at meals was ‘an ever-present reality’ but also a topic of dispute (Smith 1987: 620, 635). The host, it would seem, was ordinarily the one in the position to signal an augmented (or, indeed, demoted: Luke 14:9) status to those attending a feast. The possibility that (even within an elite event) attendees come from various strata of the community is evidenced in Plutarch’s *Table Talk* 616E–F (Smith 1987: 635), in which both ‘rich’ and ‘meaner’ folk are at same event.

3.3 *Feasting (Not Just Eating) at the Wedding Banquet*

... thinking about feasts can, and should, provide an important point of departure for understanding culture and social life in both past and present societies.

DIETLER & HAYDEN 2001a: 1

Social Scientific NT scholarship on meals and table fellowship has focused often on Douglas’s ‘deciphering’ of the meal (1972; see, for example, Neyrey 1991a and *Reader’s Guide*) and thereby ties itself in to discussions of habitual meals, in which like no doubt did eat with like. The fact that people were served different quantity or quality of food has been acknowledged (Theissen 1982: 145–74), suggesting that, at least to some extent, there were contexts in which ‘un-like’ ate with ‘un-like’. Furthermore, Neyrey himself has acknowledged that ‘most people ate [meat] only on feast days or holidays’ (*Reader’s Guide*: 3.1), which might point toward the need for a different set of criteria for examining the non-quotidian meals of the non-elite. At this point, it should be noted, too, that the bulk of Neyrey’s work is founded upon data concerning elite meals: the symposium (1991a: 364–5), a festive Jewish meal (1991a: 367), and written descriptions in general. The last of these will, of course, tend toward (textually literate) urban, elite concerns.

When we turn to the anthropology of feasting, the horizon expands somewhat: there is considerably more 'social drama' to take into account when examining these occasions, as well as different political dynamics, or 'gastro-politics' (Crowther 2013: 164–5). It would seem that feasting studies might be an appropriate avenue to pursue, given that the parables in Matthew 22 and Luke 14 focus on wedding feasts/banquets, as opposed to quotidian meals. After all, a 'like eats with like' model of meals as the lens through which one understands the 'inclusive table-fellowship' ethic of the gospels seems rather contradictory. Better suited might be a feasting model, which lends itself well to the aspiration for inclusivity. Gillian Crowther suggests that 'we can think of meals as part of a ritualized continuum of eating that moves from the everyday meal to the feast, distinguished by the level of social drama displayed at each context of eating' (2013: 155), with feasts being recognised as a 'cultural universal' (2013: 165) and the avenue via which we 'display our success' (Hayden 2001: 27). So, what of rural, non-elites? Did they, too, get to feast and to what extent would a wedding parable resonate with their experiences? Might the fissures in Neyrey's meal model be explained by an investigation into rural, non-elite wedding feasting?

A feast such as the *ohango* in Iihongo has the ritual elements identified by Victor Turner: initiands, ritual elders, and ritual symbols (McVann 1991: 336–7). That is partly because it is a marriage (functioning as ritual like the bygone *ohango yiitsali* initiation), but also because it is a marriage *feast*, as opposed to an ordinary meal. It fits the definition of 'a special meal shared by two or more people for an occasion of marked significance' (Crowther 2013: 165). Crowther presents the characteristics of a feast as follows (here, paraphrased):

1. Food: Surplus and distinct (quality and/or quantity) from everyday meals, perhaps incorporating alcohol.
2. Size: Usually larger than everyday meals.
3. Participants: Social groups (individuals, couples, families, lineages, clans, neighbourhoods, communities, ethnic groups, regional groups, representatives of nation states).
4. Time: Designated time and lengthy duration so as to 'digest' the significance of the event, make and remake reputations, and remember for future occasions.
5. Display: Use of elaborate or oversized vessels, special spatial contexts, and display of cultural capital or changed status by hosts.
6. Drama: Accentuated sense of ritual and public performance. Dramatisation of the social order, perhaps through differential seating,

a distinct serving order, stories and speeches to impress significance. Emotionally charged and memorable context.

CROWTHER 2013: 166

Feasts are rituals and function differently from everyday meals (Dietler & Hayden 2001a: 3), whilst sharing certain concerns. They may be more inclusive (transgressing social inequalities; contra Neyrey 1991a: 385), incorporate status transformation (for example, wedding rituals) but also demonstrate status affirmation in who is fed what, is seated where, and with whom (increased tendency in societies of strong social stratification [Crowther 2013: 167]). And it is in this element that the anthropology of feasting might serve to nuance and elucidate the lack of clarity encountered between the meal analogy and the parable(s) of the wedding banquet. The meal analogy functions well for modeling idealised in-group relations, but less well for expansive, inclusive, boundary-crossing relations. An agrarian, community feast in antiquity, on the other hand, might provide a powerful and resonant example of inclusivity, hospitality and generosity in a way that the elite banquet or ordinary, non-elite meal does not. Such open commensality would avoid the criticisms made of the wealthy and exclusivist elite (Smith 1987: 624). In this way, table fellowship in the form of an exclusive-turned-inclusive (royal/elite-turned-community?) wedding feast, such as that imaged in Matthew 22, might comfortably function ‘as a symbol for community fellowship’ (Smith 1987: 633). However, this claim rests on the supposition that the idea of an inclusive feast would resonate with the audiences of the parable.

In the context of a communal feast, participants enjoy the rich fruits of a particular point in the agricultural calendar, or quantities, qualities and types of food not ordinarily accessible outside of a ritual event. Bonds within the community may be affirmed and enhanced through reciprocal contribution to the staging of the feast (labour or goods), while differentials in social status are maintained in distinct seating areas and order of food service. Such a social event provided all strata opportunities to ‘network’ within the community, to forge alliances that might lead to later benefits (marriages, for example), or opportunities for dominant strata to demonstrate their generosity in redistributive giving. Such extraordinary events also formed a break from the daily toil and routine of subsistence living.

3.4 *Spatiality at the Wedding Banquet*

Further engaging that lived experience, it is important to reflect on the spatial references in the texts, locating the events as they do in domestic space – the

locus of food preparation and place 'at table'. It was this aspect (alongside the material concerns) that really prompted comparisons for the Iihongo audiences. The texts concern household space and elicited a tradition-centred hue. This coheres with the suggestion that the *egumbo* is the seat of traditional values (Shigwedha 2006: 215; *Oomeme* Summary Session) and illustrates one of the ways in which cultural context informs biblical interpretation. The setting of the text, interestingly, seems to override the setting in which the CCBIG sessions were taking place (the village church).

It is interesting in this regard, too, that the revitalised initiation ritual in some parts of Owamboland is undertaken in a designated *egumbo* and is sometimes (or by some people) kept secret from the church – the potential or actual conflict between Christianity and 'traditional' practices and beliefs is therefore still apparent (Shinovene 2012). The maintenance or performance of certain aspects of identities takes place through the occupation of 'traditional' domestic spaces and, in this case, some will risk rejection by the church and/or school in order to achieve this end. This leads me to the possible linking of identities with spaces in the gospels. Elliott refers to the 'deliberate contrast' made between Temple and household institutions by the author of Luke-Acts (Elliott 1991b: 212). He argues that the author presents the values of gospel as embodied in the household institution, and in 'irremediable conflict' with the Temple institution (1991b: 220). Of particular significance is the inclusive nature of the household as opposed to the exclusive purity system of the Temple. Certainly, the values exemplified in an Iihongo homestead, particularly seen through the *ohango* lens, illustrate the solidarity, hospitality, generosity, inclusivity and cooperation that Elliott points us towards (1991b: 224ff.). However, this is a stratified community, of which the household and wedding feast is a microcosm; inclusivity and sharing does not necessarily mean equality. As Elliott suggests, there is 'spatial demarcation of degrees of intimacy' in households, indicating clearly the relative status of those who visit and occupy those spaces; this is very apparent in the layout of an Ndonga *egumbo* and in its use in the *ohango*.

4 Conclusions

Thus today the wedding feast of Christians imitates in many respects that of the traditionalists. It is very difficult to guess to what extent they are in reality "purified" from the remnants of the ancestral cult and magic.

TUUPAINEN 1970: 103

The citation above encapsulates a Twentieth Century missionary-ethnographic perspective on the autochthonous wedding practices of the Aandonga. The wedding rituals (*ohango*) presented the earliest mission stations with a considerable and enduring problem due to their connections with wider local cosmology, within which the ancestral spirits played a significant part. Having banned the *ohango yiitsali* (female initiation) entirely, church officials finally relented on the issue of *ohango yokustelela* – the slaughter of the wedding ox for the wedding feast – so long as the slaughter was ‘cleansed’ of its so-called ‘magical’ aspects. That they relented, I suggest, may have contributed to the enduring importance of the *ongombe yohango* (wedding ox) to the *ohango* as a current institution. However, that must also be understood alongside the centrality of local agency in dictating cultural change and the local perception of a ‘proper’ *ohango* as one that necessarily incorporates the giving, slaughter and distribution of the *ongombe yohango*. It is that ox, after all, that is the primary material provision for the wedding feast, at which and through which the local community sanctions the union.

Sutton has demonstrated that ‘the transitory and repetitive act of eating [is] a medium for the more enduring act of remembering’ (2001: 2). In this way, the wedding feasting in Iihongo serves as part of a complex ritual that serves to remember the traditions of old. Here, food contributes to a sense of present identity, bound up with remembrances of the (perhaps idealised) past. Whilst the Ondonga community no longer enacts the *ohango yiitsali*, it incorporates aspects of the *ohango yokutselela* into the contemporary *ohango* ritual and celebration. In particular, those aspects focus on the material, be they location-, food-, or clothing-based.

As Crowther says of feasts, they ‘are about reinforcing existing social bonds between the participants, and they provide an opportunity to reflect on past occasions and create new shared memories as part of cultural renewal’ (2013: 168). That the contemporary *ohango* is an important part of Ndonga identities is undeniable; after all, one cannot be ‘properly’ married without having had one’s community recognise a union through an *ohango*, with all of its ‘echoes’ of past practices and beliefs: some aspects of continuity, some reintroductions and some reconstructions (and some that are all of the above).

Having considered how contemporary enactments of the *ohango* express aspects of continuity with pre-Christian marriage, I moved on to consider how the Iihongo interpretations engaged with social-scientific biblical scholarship on meals. In this regard, New Testament scholarship on food and table fellowship (including wedding banquets), has largely focused on Douglas’s investigation into the ‘degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries

and transactions across boundaries' at *quotidian meals* (1972: 61). The models of envy and limited good seem to have fallen out of focus. Meals have most often been presented in polarity as occasions for exclusive interactions of the bounded in-group, with Jesus' calls for open commensality presented as counter-cultural. However, as shown here, the meal as a ceremony and as an exclusive event does not seem to fit the wedding banquet, which is not only a meal but also a *feast*, not only a ceremony but also a *ritual*. Whilst the parables criticise the exclusivity of royal feasting (and perhaps the symposia of the elite), they appeal to the open commensality found in less lofty feasting contexts, as opposed to ordinary meals, which Neyrey (via Douglas) has shown to be predominantly in-group events.

When one considers the luxurious setting of a wedding banquet (and takes into account the anthropology of feasting, as well as the evil eye and limited good conceptual cluster), the need for demonstrations of generosity and inclusive hospitality becomes all the more apparent. Perhaps this is why the feasting setting (as opposed to quotidian meals) makes for such pointed parables on the inclusivity of the gospel. The Jesus-followers are to adopt a community feasting approach (based on the assumption that civilian feasts were more inclusive than the royal one described) as opposed to a royal or symposium model. This chapter concurs with Neyrey, then, in his argument that the image of meals and table fellowship may provide an 'ideal' for community relations in the early Christian communities. However, it is clear that the exclusivity of ordinary meals problematises the simple 'table fellowship=ideal hospitality' equation. A more appropriate ideal might be the community feast, in which inclusive relationships are developed and hospitality extended to those who cannot repay the favour (Luke 14:12–14). As a result of the consideration of Matthew 22:1–14 and Luke 14:7–11 alongside an Ndonga *ohango*, I would suggest that investigation into the anthropology of feasting (as opposed to the anthropology of meals) provides fertile ground on which to interpret New Testament texts on wedding banquets. These require separate treatment from general meals and table fellowship, for which Douglas's deciphering of the quotidian meal (1972) provides a suitable conceptual backdrop. To do so is necessary in order to determine the extent to which one might form a rounded picture of a non-elite wedding feast and distinguish it from the royal wedding banquet. It may be possible, thereafter, to establish an agrarian, communal wedding feast as a further idealised, inclusive form of commensality that would help us to unpack the relevant wedding banquet texts further. The current study has only been able to moot a point of interest rather than 'dish up' fully considered conclusions.

Interpreting the wedding banquet texts through the lens of *ohango* has brought into relief the extent to which we might consider the feast as ritual, as cementing a network of status relationships, as an inclusive event that might be a model for inclusive commensality (whilst incorporating aspects of status differentiation). It has highlighted the difficulty with imposing fixed labels or models onto aspects of the cultural landscapes of the New Testament (here, ‘meals’, or ‘meals as ceremonies’). It has also pointed toward the materiality and embodied reality of feasting, drawing back from the Western preoccupation with the ‘deeper meaning’, the symbolic: for example, in Iihongo, discussion of the Kingdom of God centred on the physical household of the King and experiences thereof.

On a related note, this chapter has suggested that landscapes (in text and lived experience, spatial and social) impact upon the resulting textual interpretation; in an Ndonga context, wedding feasts are conducted in the *egumbo*, the homestead. Some of the participants in this study have suggested that the *egumbo* is more closely aligned with things ‘traditional’, whereas the church building is the realm of the Christian. With this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that the focus of our discussions tended to be on the material aspects of the wedding and the lived experience of wedding as tradition-oriented ritual. It is notable, in this regard, that at no point in the CCBIG sessions on Matthew 22 and Luke 14 did Eucharistic interpretations surface.

Rather, it was the physical place through which the participants understood the parable, and the concern for material wastage that they empathised with. That place, it would seem, is instrumental in determining whether the interpretations returned are Christian- or tradition-centred. That the contemporary *ohango* concentrates on the *egumbo* as a location both references aspects of continuity with the historical *ohango yokutselela* (wedding feast) and informs interpretations of the parable. It was through this lens that the participants explained concerns with the material wastage that the King might incur and mapped the spatial and hierarchical organisation of the wedding banquet – the social landscape – in the text.

Blood, Clothing, and Shadows: Extending Notions of the Person in the Stories of Jairus and the Haemorrhaging Woman (Mark 5:21–43)

Mark 5:21–43 was chosen for its focus on the *Bodies* theme. Ethnographic literature suggests that the Aandonga historically conceived of the body and person as comprising more than merely their physical form, and I wanted to consider how blood, clothing, and the shadow (amongst other aspects) related to the physical person in a contemporary context. In particular, I wanted to probe the notion of the ‘mystical extension’ (the expanded self, described by Aarni [1982: 65]) and establish the extent to which that ‘traditional’ understanding of the person resonated with the participants. This was enabled by exploring whether the person of Jesus was accessible through his clothing (Mark 5:27). Additionally, this text presented discussion materials for issues of illness and healing, such as access to and the efficacy of diviner-healers (*oonganga*) in Ondonga. Further, such issues as purity, gender, and status arose in the consideration of Jairus and the haemorrhaging woman’s approach to Jesus, the conditions of the female characters, and the status the haemorrhaging woman might have in her community (also, therefore, touching upon how she might negotiate social landscapes).

The Iihongo interpretations are brought into dialogue with Feminist New Testament criticism in order to engage with the discussion surrounding the focus of the narrative: is the focus the bleeding woman’s purity or her health? Additionally, this chapter questions whether Western scholars are correct to highlight the ‘magical’ aspects of healings such as this, using the expanded sense of personhood to offer a fresh perspective.

1 Mark 5:21–43 in Iihongo CCBIGS

The discussions of Mark 5 in Iihongo were particularly notable for the way in which they revealed that blood, clothing and shadows were understood to be extensions of (and in some cases intrinsic to) the person. Blood was deemed by many to be a source of power and life force, clothing as intimately connected

to the person (at least when *on* the person), and the shadow as representative of it. In this context, the bleeding woman is losing power and life force and is understood as accessing the power of Jesus' person through the touching of his garment, which is equivalent to touching him. The groups dwelt neither on gender issues in the text nor on connections between Jairus' daughter and the haemorrhaging woman through the 'twelve year' motif. That this discussion focuses largely on the woman and not on Jairus' daughter is a function of the fluidity and unpredictability of CBS/CCBIG sessions; that is simply where the discussion took us.

1.1 *Iihongo Perspectives on Blood*

The women's group explained to me the significance of blood within their worldviews. Blood, as has been seen in reference to the wedding ox, is of importance not just in relation to humans but also to animals (and especially cattle, those being the most highly prized animals within the animal husbandry system in Owambo cultures). It is through the blood of cattle that the living populations connect(ed) with the ancestors, with whom they sanctioned marital unions and mourned the recently deceased. In the case of a wedding, the blood of an ox pays for the bride:

Memekulu Rauha Andreas:

When it came to the wedding event the men used to give the cattle to the family of the girl so that they can exchange for the girl. The blood of the cattle pays for the girl.

Memekulu Frieda Namugongo:

In our tradition, as from our forefathers, the girl should be exchanged with the cattle. The price for the woman is cattle. When the day of marriage comes, people meet the cattle [being delivered] by shouting '*ipindi ya landa*' ['we get what we bought'].

The sense that the blood of an ox is in some way equivalent to, or representative of, the life of a human being (and therefore imbued with a high degree of significance and potency) continued when the women explained traditional procedures to deal with cases of murder or manslaughter:

- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: In Ndonga culture, if someone kills a person, that killer or the family of the killer should take a cattle to the Royal Palace [*ombala kwaniilwa*]. Then that cattle is slaughtered and the blood is run through without catching it [normally it would be caught in a container for consumption]. This is an indication that you wash out your sin. This cattle is called *onkomba mbinzi* ['to wipe out the blood']. It is killed before the burial [of the victim].
- Author: The reason why they give that cattle it is the sign to apologise to the family of the deceased and it is to prevent the killer from getting bad luck.
- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: So, the blood goes into the land?
- Author: And even the meat, it is given to everyone around.
- Author: Is it important that the blood goes into the land?
- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: It is because you kill it before the burial. That blood must go into the ground before the victim.

Prior to this session, my translator had told me that 'blood is expensive', in the sense that spilling it is grave. Comments from one of the children affirmed this claim:

- Albertina Nicodemus: Blood is important because, for example, if you are fighting and you make someone bleed, you have to pay for it. The traditional leaders will charge you.
- Author: What would they charge you?
- Albertina Nicodemus: It depends on the blood. If it is too much you pay a cattle. But if it is just small, you pay some money.

Reverend Thomas Uushona (my translator) had also noted that should blood be spilled on the road at the site of a fatal car accident it will be collected and later buried with the body of the victim. The above examples would seem to confirm that there is an important connection to be made between blood and notions of the person, and through blood to the land (and the ancestors who inhabit that land). In the above case, the killer and his/her family sacrifice a head of cattle (in the sense of forgoing the ongoing benefits of) perhaps to ‘pay’ for the life taken, if that is what is meant by washing away the killer’s sin. Certainly, they aim to ‘apologise’ to the deceased’s family, and it seems reasonable to assume that that would include the *aathithi* of the deceased: their ancestral spirits, who are widely deemed to be active in a contemporary setting (see Chapters 5–7). Lastly, it is their intention ‘to prevent the killer from getting bad luck’. This raises the question of where that bad luck would come from – from the deceased’s *aathithi*? From the deceased’s living kin? From unknown cosmological forces? Because Memekulu Frieda Namugongo stressed that the blood must run into the land, I would suggest that the land-based, ancestral spirits might be the source of the ‘bad luck’, particularly if it is indeed they who might be appeased by the blood.

That blood has agency was further highlighted by the explanation that blood consumption can be problematic for children (Memekulu Maria Kondo, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo), although precisely why this was the case remained unclear, other than the fact it would cause them stomach pain. Tatekulu Laban Iyambo was clear in his statement that there was no power to be acquired by the consumption of animal blood: ‘we just eat it as we eat ordinary food.’ Much clearer was the connection between a person’s blood and their vitality:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Author: | Is a person’s soul or life-force in the blood? What is in the blood? |
| Meme Maria Kashowa: | Yes, because if the blood is out then that is the end of your life. |
| Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: | There is cooperation between the blood and the soul. |
| Author: | What are the characteristics of human blood? Is it safe, dangerous, dirty, clean, polluting? |
| Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: | Blood contains danger. You cannot just go and touch somebody’s blood. |
| Author: | What danger? |

- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: You could be affected by illness, viruses, or bacteria.¹
- Author: Reverend Thomas [translator] was telling me about burying a victim's blood with their body if they die in a car accident. You have to collect it. Is there anything similar to this you can tell me about?
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: Yes, it is normal to bury someone with his blood. You cannot just leave the blood for the dogs.

There was consensus in the women's group that blood constituted or contained power. As Memekulu Frieda Namugongo explained, that sense has implications for the haemorrhaging woman in Mark 5:

- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: That woman is very lucky because she was bleeding for many years but she is alive. Her life is in bad condition because sometimes we get power from our blood. So she can become weak day by day. So she suffered.

Tatekulu Laban Iyambo echoed the sentiment that the woman must have suffered a great deal, as well as pointing out how one's existence would be 'complicated' if bleeding for twelve years, with the woman's life steadily 'going to an end' because 'blood is life'. That life ends when blood is lost was contextualised by Martha Nangolo: 'Blood, it is important because it is the life. For example, if you slaughter a goat, when the blood stops, then the goat also dies.'

1.2 *Ihongo Perspectives on Touch and Clothing*

We also discussed how touch was operating in the case of the healing of Jairus' daughter. I was interested to know if the participants were familiar with healing through touch, drawing on their own contexts:

1 Unaid.org (accessed 30.08.2015) reports that in 2014 the prevalence of HIV infection amongst Namibian adults aged 15–49 was approximately 16.0%. Hileni Iiyambo, in the children's session, also noted that blood 'contains some diseases,' perhaps connected to a high level of concern for the prevention of transmission of HIV/AIDS.

- Author: How do you think the power of touch is working in the text?
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: The power Jesus used through touching is a heavenly power because every time Jesus did something like healing he faced upwards to ask the power from God.
- Author: We have not found many examples of the power of touch in Ndonga culture. Is it true to say that the power of touch is not so important in your culture?
- Meme Maria Kashowa: Yes, we do have that power because a long time ago when people got ill there were not even hospitals but our forefathers would ask the ancestors for the power to heal people and then that person would get well.
- Author: And would they use touch?
- Meme Maria Kashowa: Yes, sometimes you heal through touching and sometimes by using herbs and applying them to the skin through touching.²
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: We heard from our parents that long ago people were healed that way but we don't experience it.

Tatekulu Laban Iyambo, by contrast, did not find links between Ndonga culture and the power of touch (or command) to heal, saying, 'we don't have that power in our culture. There is no such touching or commanding to heal.' In the children's session, Hileni Iiyambo stated that she was 'surprised' to hear that the woman was made well through touch alone. Whilst Wilbartina Teofilus mentioned that 'the revival church, they heal through touching', all bar one in the children's group felt that the power of touch was not a significant element of Ndonga culture. It would seem that the historical methods to which the women referred have fallen out of use, to the extent that many children are not aware of such practices at all.

We went on to consider how touch might operate in the case of the haemorrhaging woman grasping Jesus' garment:

² Hileni Iiyambo also referred to this process: 'The *onganga* can use water mixed with herbs and apply this to your body' (*Aanona*, CCBIG John 9:1–12).

- Author: The woman is healed by touching Jesus' clothing. Is something of a person contained in their clothing?
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: There is not anything in the clothes but the woman is just healed by her faith. She believes that if she just touches Jesus' dress she will get well. For example, when I am sick I ask the pastor to come and pray for me. I choose her and not another person. And when she comes and prays for me I feel comfortable and I get what I expect.
- Author: Do others agree that there is nothing in the clothing?
- Meme Paulina Inane: There is nothing in the clothes but only the spirit of Jesus heals.

However, when Reverend Thomas Uushona introduced a contextual example, the views of the women were tested:

- Translator: People don't feel I am truly empowered if I don't come in the pastor's robes. How would you feel if I come without the proper robes to a Sunday service?
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: We get worried.
- Translator: But why? There is nothing in the gowns.
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: They are blessed. The clothes for Jesus are also blessed.
- Author: In the story, do you think the woman thinks that Jesus' clothing is an extension of him?
- Meme Maria Kashowa: The clothes are an extension of Jesus because if Jesus was not there then the clothes would not be there. So when the woman touches the dress she touches part of Jesus.
- Author: Do all agree?
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: We agree.

- Author: What if Jesus had left his coat on the floor and gone away. Would she be healed through touching his discarded coat?
- Meme Maria Kashowa: Yes, she would get well because the clothes are for Jesus. He is the owner. He just forgot it.
- Author: But earlier you said there was nothing in the clothes. Do you feel differently now?
- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: I don't agree with Meme Maria because the clothes only have the power when on the body. Jesus felt the power go when the clothing was on his body.

Tatekulu Laban Iyambo's comments on clothing echo Meme Maria Kashowa's understanding of clothing as personal extension. He suggested that 'Jesus has power everywhere – physically and also in materials.' He connected that to the Ndonga context, saying, 'we have a connection with our material. For example, if the clothes are mine, they are *mine*. Therefore, if I don't know where are my clothes, I feel bad, I feel pain. I don't know where is a part of me.' He suggested that one would perceive the extraordinary nature of Jesus' clothing: 'if you wear those clothes of Jesus you feel it is different. You feel it is the holy one. His clothes are like his word. Both have power.' To disrespect one's clothing, explained Tatekulu Laban, is to disrupt the intimate connection operating between person and possessions – a sense of who one *is* in relation to what one *has*:

- Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: On the case of shadow or land, I said you cannot harm me because nothing happen[s]. But in the case of clothing, when you come and you want to make it dirty or tear it, I have to react because you want to reshape my clothes.

This perspective on clothing as an extension contextualises his suggestion that there had been a *direct* power transfer from Jesus to the woman. I note that he comments that Jesus (and not his clothing) has been touched, perhaps because he sees such a strong connection between the individual and material extensions:

Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: When Jesus is touched by the woman he feels power going from him and looks to the woman. The same for the woman – she feels power come in. That is why the bleeding stops.

Whilst at least some of the adults argued that clothing is an extension of the person and may even have agency without the presence of that individual, the children were less certain. Loide Elago expressed the idea that Jesus' clothes had healing power commensurate with his role as a healer but that 'the power of Jesus is only in the clothes when they are on his body. If they are just there, nothing will happen.' Investigating this further, and delving into their own context, the children gave me the impression that they did not share (for example) Tatekulu Laban Iyambo's understanding of such a strong link between person and possessions:

Author:	If I harm your clothing, am I harming you?
Ester Nicodemus:	No, only when it is on my body.
Loide Elago:	If you cut my clothes you harm my heart.
Author:	So I will hurt your feelings, but will I physically hurt you?
Loide Elago:	You will not harm me physically.
Elizabeth Imbondi:	If you even leave my clothes in the sun, you harm my feelings.
Author:	Why?
Elizabeth Imbondi:	You harm me because sometimes that clothes is the only one I have. And if you destroy it, I won't have anything.
Author:	Will I get someone's characteristics by wearing their clothing?
Anna Ikukutu:	No. [all agree]

However, the children's contributions do not altogether reject the idea of material agency. They went on to discuss the apotropaic power of beads (*omagwe*; see Figure 4), a belt and a rope against the threat of witchcraft:

Author:	Is there power in the beads you might wear around your waist?
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FIGURE 4 Young woman (centre) wearing *omagwe* around her waist

- Wilbartina Teofilus: Yes, because if you are [be]witched by someone but you are not wearing it, you will never be cured but if you are wearing it, nothing will happen.
[All are agreed]
- Selma Kwedhi: If [a woman is] is pregnant, she may even remove the beads and replace them with anything else like a belt.
- Hileni Iiyambo: The pregnant woman is in danger [from witchcraft] but even the child she will bear could get sick or die. Yes, she is in very big danger. Normally the woman cannot wear beads on the abdomen. You need even just a small rope around you.

1.3 *Ihongo Perspectives on the Shadow*

Having read about extensions of the person in ethnographic works, I wondered if the idea of the shadow as an extension resonated with the participants, especially as the haemorrhaging woman approached Jesus 'in his shadow', as it were.

- Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: In my shadow, or in the land where my *egumbo* is located, that is mine, my property. I feel proud for that. The land where I am, I am proud of the fields I plough because I work the land and it gives me food. The shadow is like the reflection. I feel proud to see my reflection and my shadow.
- Author: If I stamp on your land or your shadow, do I harm you? Will you feel it?
- Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: The shadow, no. To me, it doesn't harm me. If you step on my shadow, I just move away.

At first glance, it seems that Tatekulu Laban Iyambo's perspective is that to step on someone's shadow constitutes a physically innocuous act. Upon closer inspection, however, it is interesting that he mentioned moving away: the need to move away suggests that having someone step on your shadow is, at the very least, undesirable. After all, there would be no need to move away were there absolutely no ramifications. Admittedly, in translation there is a degree of ambiguity: it is not clear whether he means he *could* move away or that he *would* move away. Much stronger was the reaction of the women to the idea of assaulting someone's shadow:

- Author: If I touch or attack your shadow, is it the same as touching you?
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: The shadow is *mine*. You cannot try to beat my shadow. It would show there is hatred between us.
- Author: Would you suffer if I beat your shadow?
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: No, it is not good to step on my shadow deliberately. I will feel you harm me.
- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: It is not good. We are human beings. If someone stands there and steps on your shadow, you will think there is something they want to do to you.
- Author: Just to clarify, can you feel it physically if someone attacks your shadow?
- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: The shadow, we regard it as a sign of your death following you. Therefore, if you play with my shadow, I think maybe you want to rush my death.
- Translator: How do you feel if your shadow crosses fire or thorn bushes?
- Consensus: That is different because it is an accident.

As with clothing, the children did not feel that physical harm could be visited upon a person through their shadow (and were not familiar with the idea of the shadow as a sign of one's death) but they did suggest that there was a threat to their feelings, or sense of well-being:

- Author: What if I stamp on your shadow?
- Selma Kwedhi: You feel nothing.
- Hileni Iiyambo: I would feel bad because you try to harm my shape.
- Author: Does anyone think I can harm them through their shadow?
- Hileni Iiyambo, Ester
Nicodemus, Martha Nangolo: You cause spiritual pain. [*komwenyo* – to the spirit]

- Author: Have you heard the idea that your shadow is your death following you around?
- Ester Nicodemus: No, but I agree because when you die, your shadow also disappears.

Conversation about shadows also engaged the issue of the haemorrhaging woman approaching Jesus from behind, in contrast to Jairus' (presumably) frontal approach:

- Author: Does anyone think there is something unusual about how the woman approaches Jesus? What do you think of the way she approaches?
- Memekulu Maria Kondo: The way the woman approaches Jesus is not a proper way because in our culture we approach the person face-to-face.
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: The way the woman approaches Jesus was not a good way because she approached from behind, but she did it because she did not have a good way to approach.
- Meme Beata Mbinga: In Ndonga culture it is unusual to approach the person from behind.
- Author: Why is it unusual?
- Meme Beata Mbinga: In Ndonga culture you have to respect a person and Jesus was one of the persons who should be respected in the society. So, the woman behind is showing disrespect.
- Memekulu Rauha Andreas: I agree that is an indication of disrespect. No one should be allowed to approach a prominent person like this.
- Author: Do you see any connection between the status of Jairus/the woman and the way in which they approach Jesus?

Memekulu Rauha Andreas:	Jairus was a prominent person. Always the well-known person they are always respected. Maybe when Jairus came, they made a way for Jairus to come through. And the woman is just a poor person, so people didn't respect her and make a way for her. So, she approach from behind and try by all means to touch Jesus and hope to be healed.
Ester Nicodemus	In our area, when you want to talk to someone, you stand at the front and talk to them.

For Tatekulu Laban Iyambo, the woman's approach was explained by the presence of the crowd (a point also made by Ester Nicodemus), which he felt must not have been there when Jairus approached. He noted that to cross behind someone would lead to anticipation of theft. However, he also added that in an Ndonga context, 'you cannot walk behind someone's back. You must walk across the front', where the person can see you. This led Reverend Thomas Uushona to suggest that I ask another question, the answer to which prompted an interesting aside later on in the session:

Author:	What if someone is blind? Can I walk behind them?
Tatekulu Iyambo:	The person is just a person, therefore even if he is blind, just walk on the front. Animals are another thing. You can walk behind. [When Tatekulu Laban Iyambo had left the room during a break, Reverend Uushona explained that he thought Tatekulu Laban Iyambo wanted to say more on this but was embarrassed. Reverend Uushona suggested that Tatekulu Laban had in mind the point that 'appropriate' sexual activity between human beings should take place face-to-face, whereas in animal species, the male often mounts the female from behind. He suggested that this influences Tatekulu Laban's understanding that it is appropriate to approach someone from the front or pass in front of them.]

Contributions from the children's session (for example, Loide Elago) suggested that Jesus' mercy outweighed what Ester Nicodemus felt *was* disrespectful behaviour. Meme Beata Mbinga commented that 'Jesus was not angry but, in our culture, if you touch me the same way I will ask with an angry voice, "who touched me?"' The contributions across the groups were united in this understanding that Jesus' response was not an angry one. It was widely expressed that that it was the woman's faith in Jesus that had enabled the healing (Memekulu Rauha Andreas, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo) and overrode the disrespectful nature of her approach.

1.4 *Implications for Jairus' Daughter and the Haemorrhaging Woman*

What, then, are the implications of the above discussions for the narrative? The situation of the haemorrhaging woman was deemed to be 'critical' (Elizabeth Imbondi), with concern focused on the fact that she was near-death (Elizabeth Imbondi, Hileni Iiyambo, Ester Nicodemus), as opposed to unclean or stigmatised.³ In considering the nature of the woman's condition, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo saw parallels 'in our community' and suggested that her bleeding was connected to pregnancy or a postpartum condition, which could only be cured through hospital attention: 'the bleeding disease can affect every woman who is about to give birth or just after birth.' He rejected possible connections between the girl and the woman based on repeated use of the number twelve, feeling that to be coincidence, as the girl 'was still not mature.' This sentiment was echoed in the session with the children (Albertina Nicodemus, Ester Nicodemus).

When we considered how the haemorrhaging woman's community might respond to her, Memekulu Frieda Namugongo suggested that 'some might avoid her but some would have pity for her', whilst Ester Nicodemus suggested the woman would be viewed as entirely 'helpless'. Considering how his community might respond to someone with such a condition, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo suggested that 'they are approaching and assisting in a friendly way, even by washing the clothes.' The theme of helplessness also arose in relation to Jairus; had he lost his daughter, Jairus would become 'helpless in his old age' because 'the child was his future' (Wilbartina Teofilus). Another of the children expanded on this point:

3 There was potential for the woman to be interpreted as a stigmatised figure, with witchcraft and divine punishment being in causal relationship with illness and disability: 'disability can be seen in three ways. It is seen as misfortune. It is seen as the result of being bewitched (in a traditional way). It is seen as a gift from God (in a Christian way). Some people may hide disabled people. People used to kill disabled newborns. There is sometimes shame associated with a disabled member of the family. It may be seen as punishment from *Kalunga*.' (Reverend Thomas Uushona, Interview, 23.06.2015).

Albertina Nicodemus: The young generation are the active one. Because you can even send her somewhere quick and come back. But if she is dead then that household becomes helpless. Sometimes, the young ones are looking for firewood, cooking, pounding [the grain]. So that young one was a key bone in that house.

Regarding the woman's economic situation, Hileni Iiyambo made the insightful remark that 'according to the text, the woman lost much money to pay the witchdoctors. That is an indication that she had something. She was not poor. She became poor by looking for help. She may have a family, but they lost hope because she has suffered for many years.' Klaudia Ashikuti suggested that the scenario could be explained by family support: 'maybe her father was a rich person.' There was also sympathy from Tatekulu Laban Iyambo that the woman 'went to *oonganga* [diviner-healers (pl.)] to find the herbs but she only lose a lot of money without getting any help.' He repeated later that there was a notable 'wasting of economy' in the woman's situation due to the lack of success found through *oonganga*.

I thought initially that this was a relatively rare instance of Tatekulu Laban being comfortable referencing the realm of the 'traditional' – ordinarily, he demonstrated a very high level of Christian religiosity and a tendency to avoid discussing pre-missionary beliefs and practices. However, the text itself uses the *Oshindonga* term *oonganga* (5: 26), which provides a ready explanation. It is perhaps also significant that he was referring to past activities (drawing a link between a biblical setting and the dominant healing arena prior to the arrival of mission hospitals). The fact that the *oonganga* are expressly stated to have *failed* to secure the woman any relief may also have aligned with his worldview and encouraged him to contextualise the woman's situation (with reference to 'herbs'). For some of the women and children, however, the cleavage from past practice was less clear-cut and *oonganga* were still of significance in their own context and experience:

Ester Nicodemus:	We learn in the story that the woman went to the witchdoctor [<i>onganga</i>] but did not find any help. The same for our people – they go to the witchdoctors but are not cured. They are wasting their money.
Author:	Are you saying the <i>onganga</i> doesn't have any power?

Ester Nicodemus:	There are some witchdoctors cure them but the others they are false witchdoctors.
Meme Beata Mbinga:	Also, in our culture, we get ill and you go everywhere looking for help, even to witchdoctors and you pay them, but you will not find the solution. You just become poor at the end.
Memekulu Rauha Andreas:	Sometimes you get sick and your neighbours or family come to you and mislead you, saying 'your sickness is only cure when you go to the witchdoctor, this is not for the hospital.'

Investigation of the text has, in this instance, revealed a decrease in confidence in the capacities of *oonganga*, whilst simultaneously suggesting that traditional healers do still operate, and that people do still visit them on occasion. This ambivalence speaks to the resilience of indigenous medicine, which was one of the main target areas of missionary suspicion:

Memekulu Frieda Namugongo:	Culture and Christianity on the one hand are travelling on one way [are aligned]. On the other hand, there are two ways [sometimes they disagree]. That is why the Christianity chased away the [parts of] culture which are not good, which are misleading the nation, like witchdoctors. There is a contradiction between [them].
Meme Beata Mbinga:	Sometimes we have traditional dancing somewhere and you are not disobeying [Christianity] if you go, but Christianity does not allow you to go to the witchdoctor. Even the abortion. In tradition, people were allowed to have abortions but Christianity disagreed with that.

Oomeme, Summary Session

The church was the only obstacle when it came to our traditional practices. If one visited a traditional healer, he or she will be regarded as one who trespassed against God's commandments. You will then be told to stand in front of the congregation for forgiveness. Even today the church is absolutely against those practices. But nowadays civilisation has gone a step further and people have come to realise what is good and what is wrong. Even myself, I do not like some of these traditional healers because they cheat people. But in some cases they really cure people well.

ALINA HEITA, Interview, 11th October 1989, in Hayes 1992.2: 126

Traditional healers and healing formed one area deemed to be in particular contravention of missionary Christian norms. Hospitals and spiritual healing via Christ were emphasised, and the reality of local demonology was downplayed. Tuupainen brings to the fore the extent to which different places were endowed with different magico-religious qualities, along 'traditional' and Christian lines: the *egumbo*, participants tell her, was 'the sphere of witchcraft and magic', whilst the Aandonga were 'relieved' of those influences in European hospitals (1970: 77). A participant in the current study also aligned Christianity with the medical field:

Memekulu Rauha Andreas: For example, in early age our forefathers were more dependant on the witchdoctor [*onganga*]. But on the other hand, the witchdoctors are helpless in our life. So, we dropped them and in Christianity the first missionaries brought hospitals, so we go there and the witchdoctors are down.

Author: Do you associate hospitals with Christianity, then?

Memekulu Rauha Andreas: Yes, the hospital and Christianity are associated like brother and sister.

Oomeme, Summary Session

2 Ethnographic Contextualisation

The following points may be summarised from the discussions above and then set in their ethnographic context, in order to identify resonances with autochthonous worldviews and practices:

- i. Blood is understood as the life force of the human being and/or the source of one's power. So precious and integral is it to the person that, if spilled by another, traditional authorities will order compensation, and if spilled at death it should be collected and buried with the body. The potency and agency of blood is further emphasised by the ritual use of animal blood.
- ii. A person's clothing is understood by some to be an extension of the person. That person may be 'accessed' (harmed, offended, understood) via their clothing.
- iii. For some, the shadow represents and is integral to the person's life. To attack a shadow is to attack the person.
- iv. The main point of significance of the narrative was seen to be the woman's faith; her positive mindset enabled the healing and overrode what might otherwise be seen as a deviant or disrespectful approach (from behind Jesus, in his shadow).

2.1 *Ethnographic Contextualisation: Blood*

The Ovambos regarded blood as a communication link to the invisible world. (The blood of the sacrificial animal was the animal's 'soul', 'nourishment' for the spirits, the essence of the sacrifices both to ancestors and other spirits.) By the same token, after circumcision, blood became the communication link that tied the initiates both to the land of the tribe (being an inheritance from the ancestors) and to the ancestors themselves.

AARNI 1982: 39

As the above citation indicates, references to blood (*ombinzi*) in the ethnographic literature are multivalent, focusing on animal as well as human blood. A survey of this literature also indicates ambivalence regarding the positive and negative characteristics of blood, and it is in the context of this ambivalence that I wish to situate the groups' reluctance to focus on the woman's haemorrhage as a polluting condition.

With regard to blood as life, Aarni states that the blood of a sacrificial animal was seen to be the 'seat of the animal's life' (1982: 65). He argues that this does not mean that a human being's 'soul' is understood as contained within *their* blood. However, Hiltunen's work nuances this claim and (at the very least) suggests that the blood was seen to contain the life-force of the person. She contends repeatedly that 'blood symbolizes life' (for example, 1993: 41) and suggests that animal blood was used to represent the blood (life) of a person:

for example, a diviner-healer (*onganga*) might use the blood (and liver) of an antelope in a ritual to destroy a witch (Hiltunen 1986: 119–124) and thereby promote cosmological and social harmony. Therein, the ‘blood and liver stand for the spirit, for life itself. If they are destroyed, [the witch’s] life has really been lost’ (1986: 123; see also Davies 1994 2: 43, wherein the liver is described as ‘the repository of the soul’). In the *etikilo* (cursing) ritual, it is the pouring into water and stabbing of the blood, and/or the cooking of the blood (and liver) of the animal that effects the destruction of the witch. This is in direct response to the power of blood being deliberately directed to malevolent ends: Hiltunen reports a case where traces of blood found in a homestead were deemed to be evidence of the practice of witchcraft (1986: 34). Here, just as in the CCBIG examples of animal blood ‘paying’ for the bride and for a murder/manslaughter victim, animal blood may indeed symbolise human blood and life. The equation of blood with life is also suggested by ‘the general belief that the baby develops out of menstrual blood’, although this is in the context of an unhelpful generalisation about ‘Bantus’ (Tuupainen 1970: 44).

The potency and agency of human blood is highlighted by the historical circumcision rite, in which men formally joined the ranks of the Aawambo. Through the spilling of their own blood, they were placed – spatially and hierarchically – within an ancestral community.⁴ Citing a poem about the ancestors by Okot p’Bitek, Aarni explains that animal blood (that of a chicken, goat, dog, or ox) is also offered as food to those ancestors, with the community urging them, in response, to treat the living well, ensure safety in childbirth, stave off illness and death, and to keep enemies away (1982: 46–7). This ‘bloody *ohula*’ (blood-sacrifice) enabled the Aawambo to ‘find peace with the spirits’ (Aarni 1982: 73). Similarly, Hiltunen reports that a spirit causing illness by inhabiting a living relative was sometimes deemed to ‘want’ blood, which it was fed through the sick individual (1986: 75). In these cases, blood acts as a form of appeasement, gift, hospitality, and tribute, offered for both preventative and curative purposes. Contextually, animal blood is seen as ‘nourishment’ for people and spirits – it feeds and sustains, and is of interest to the dead in a way that animal flesh is not. In fact, Aarni argues, cattle blood actually contained the ‘essence of life’ of the ancestors (Aarni 1982: 63). Quite apart from the question of whether the seat of human life or spirit is *in the blood*, this gives foundation to the CCBIGS’ focus on the haemorrhaging woman slowly losing her life.

4 That those in important offices had to be old, circumcised men may be significant in this regard (for example, Hiltunen 1993: 79); they were deeply embedded in the community of the living and dead by virtue of their seniority and circumcision (a blood-tie).

Beyond tackling witchcraft and nourishing the spirits, there are several other arenas in which blood has a positive, purifying or cleansing function in Owambo contexts. The first of these is as the major part of rain offerings (Hiltunen 1993: 81), with blood therefore being associated with agriculture, food, and nourishment in general. It arose in the CCBIG sessions on John 9:1–12 that blood from cuts (*oonsha*) made in the upper cheeks or eyebrows is used in Iihongo a cleanser-purifier for eye pain. The association between blood and healing is mirrored in the practice of initiating second-tier *oonganga* (diviner-healers). It is through a blood initiation this class of diviner is able to heal illness and not just to diagnose it (an ash-diviner, by contrast, is only able to perform diagnosis: Hiltunen 1993: 40–1). Gwyneth Davies details examples of cattle blood being used to treat spirit-affliction, which further emphasises the connections between cattle, the living, and the deceased (1994 2: 31). Ox blood was also used by *oonganga* to purify a homestead afflicted by twin births (which were taboo, *oshidhila*; see also Douglas 1970: 52); the *onganga* would sprinkle blood on the homestead's doorposts and passageways (Hiltunen 1993: 202). In addition, Hiltunen makes reference to 'an ox-offering rite in which washing with bloody water, medicine plants (*iimbondi*) and fire are important media' in counteracting or lifting magical curses (1986: 29; see also 148–9).

In the *ohango*, too, positive connotations of blood are evident (see Chapter 3), with ox blood actually ratifying the marriage (Tuupainen 1970: 73). Its 'magic power' has wider implications, though: brides crawled through a bloody carcass for purification and drank the *ongombe yohango* (wedding ox) blood mixed with beer for fertility (these two actions may also take place when *ohula* [blood-sacrifice to the ancestors] is used to cure illness: Tuupainen 1970: 152). However, the use of blood was subject to taboo (*oshidhila*) in some circumstances: a pregnant wife must not drink the beer-blood mixture as it could cause miscarriage (Tuupainen 1970: 57), lending ambivalence to its agency. All of this should be understood in a pastoral and cosmological context in which cattle provide the link between the living and the dead (Tuupainen 1970: 55). The blood of these animals acts on such diverse concerns as drought, illness, fertility and marital unions.

Whilst the ethnographic literature cited above depicts blood as predominantly positive (and may thereby explain why the interpretations returned did not image the haemorrhaging woman as in an impure condition), there is one situation in which blood is seen to be a catastrophic pollutant: the case of spilling the blood of another (blood guilt: *uutoni*), to which Memekulu Frieda Namugongo referred. Hiltunen explains the purification rites that must be undergone to cleanse the killer of the 'defilement' of blood-lust, lest it become a contagion (1993: 218). The blood of the victim, she reports, 'called for

revenge' (1993: 220) and exerts a power on the killer. In this case, water, herbs and spells enabled a diviner to purify the contaminated person, who is 'intoxicated with blood (*a kotwa ombinzi*)' (1993: 219). This contrasts with the ritual spilling of the blood of an ox at the royal palace that Memekulu Frieda detailed, perhaps because Hiltunen's example is from a resident of the Ombandja region. That blood sometimes acts as a contaminant should be understood within wider Owambo illness aetiology; Davies suggests it is (at least partially) founded upon notions of contagion that existed 'prior to European influence' (1994 2: 47). There was, for example, a sense that starvation was contagious and thus victims of famine would not be buried (McKittrick 2002: 77–8). Within this conceptual framework, albeit not specific to the Ondonga area, Davies explains that where there is a haemorrhaging condition, 'there is something impure and disruptive within the body using the blood as a vehicle', which would be tackled with blood-letting as a means of release (1994 2: 36). This coheres with attitudes to menstruation, which Davies suggests is perceived to be 'depurative' (1994 2: 9). It is doubly notable, contextualised thus, that the groups did not focus on the haemorrhaging woman as polluted.

Finally, and of particular note regarding the agency of human blood, Tuupainen briefly discusses the explanations given by male informants of choosing a wife. She reports that some said 'our blood(s) "want" together; our blood(s) understood each other' (1970: 102). Whilst Tuupainen understands this as meaning there was 'fitness to each other, harmony, in a word true love', one might also venture that it is suggestive of the very agency of blood. The cultural context – one in which blood has not only purifying and fertility-enhancing qualities but also injurious capabilities and detrimental potency – lends support to the interpretation that someone's blood could actively draw them to another.

2.2 *Ethnographic Contextualisation: Clothing, the Shadow, and Extensions of the Person*

Social anthropologists use the term 'law of the contact' [*sic*], which means that the active force (or power) of an object or of a living being is hidden away in a part of that object or being. For instance, one has power to injure another person by the help of his saliva or sand taken from his footprints. According to this 'law' the objects and beings which once have been in contact with each another [*sic*] are also later on in a constant reciprocal relation: what happens to one part also happens to the other.

HILTUNEN 1986: 129

It is also important to contextualise blood within a complex of bodily parts and fluids, as well as concepts surrounding the body. The individual is described in ethnographic literature as being comprised of the physical body (*oluto*), the body-soul (*omwenyo*) and the free-soul (*ombepo*) (Davies 1994 3: 2–3). The *omwenyo* is the physical body's animating force, whilst the *ombepo* is the 'element of the person ... able to wander freely from the physical body, especially when dreaming or in a faint' and which may engage with *oombepo* (pl.) of the deceased (Davies 1994 3: 2). In addition, there is the seat of emotions (heart: *omutima*) and the shadow (*omuzizimba*), with the latter incorporating aspects of the 'mystical extension' (Aarni 1982: 65–70). These include, for example, the spit, semen, excreta, imprints (footprints, 'seatprint'), reflection, shadow, name, clothing, and other belongings. All are intrinsic to the self. As such, each heightens vulnerability by providing access to the person with whom they are associated.

A brief discussion of a few examples will suffice before focusing on clothing and the shadow as aspects arising in the CCBIG discussions. It is widely reported that saliva was deemed an extension of the person (Aarni 1982: 69) and as containing their 'power' (*oonkondo*),⁵ such that spitting was the first act in any sacrificial rite (Aarni 1982: 64). Estermann notes that 'ritual spit' accompanied prayers to *Kalunga* offered on the occasion of a wedding and during the delivery of a baby (1976: 183). It played a prominent role in offerings made to the spirits of the east and west, too, with the owner of the house spitting on morsels of porridge from the first harvest and throwing them in each direction (Estermann 1976: 191).

As an extension, saliva could operate outwardly for good, such as in blessing and sacrifice, but was *also* considered vulnerable to inward attack from sorcery if one carelessly spat on the ground in dubious company, for example (Hiltunen 1986: 130; cf. Douglas 1996: 112). Hiltunen discusses its positive use (sending out a part of oneself) in 'the most common type of offering ... a spittle offering [*esaagelo*] that is believed to bring a blessing' (1993: 35; see also Aarni 1982: 46), as well as offerings for rain in which blood is taken into the mouth and then spat out (1993: 75). Whether outwardly or inwardly, saliva is a strong conductor of positive or negative power, extending one's reach *and* vulnerability. Tatekulu Laban Iyambo suggested that 'the power of Jesus is everywhere, even in his spit' in reference to John 9:1–12. However, he did not connect this to an Ndonga worldview, saying he had 'no idea' how spit functioned traditionally

5 This is the power also associated with kings' graves, spirits and ancestors, *oonganga* (traditional healers) and amulets (Aarni 1982: 64).

in Ondonga (*Ootate*, CCBIG John 9:1–12). In fact, reference to the ritual use of spit was conspicuous in its absence across the CCBIG sessions.

Davies comments on the use of the name in acts of sorcery (1994 2: 43), which corresponds with the importance of knowing the ‘correct name’ for the effective execution of rituals to identify and counter those using witchcraft, itself acquired through breastmilk (Tönjes 1996: 192), or through transference from person to materials such as comestibles (Hiltunen 1986: 67–8; see also Proverbs 23:6–8).⁶ Just as the name might be used in witchcraft and sorcery, there was concern, too, that excreta might be used for ‘nefarious purposes’ (Davies 1994 2: 9). Referring to a story of storing a skull in a corn bin for increased yield, Hiltunen also speculates that ‘soul power’ may have been believed to increase in density toward the ‘the ends of the body, in the hair and nails’ (1993: 118).

The above examples of spit, the name, excreta, and the fringes of the body suggest that historical Owambo understandings of the person considerably extend my own notion of a person – that of an individual bounded in a singular embodied state at a fixed point in space and time. An expanded frame of reference illuminates some of the comments about clothing in the CCBIG sessions and suggests that some of the Iihongo interpretations of Mark 5:21–43 are directly influenced by pre-Christian conceptions of the person. At least some of the participants understood there to be material agency in clothing (that of Jesus or a pastor) and adornments (beads), through which one might trace direct links with worldviews described in the ethnographic record.

In a historical Ndonga setting, clothing was understood as a reservoir of power and/or essence as part of its intimate connection with the clothed or recently-clothed person. This is exemplified by an example Hiltunen provides: Chief Kamonde was unwilling to hand over his clothes to Chief Nehale because his clothing could be used in an *etikilo* (cursing) ritual (1986: 129). Aarni, too, mentions the touching of the clothing and possessions of the dead as part of a family’s ‘last fare-well to the deceased’ (1982: 42). However, Nampala’s description of a Kwanyama funeral suggests that touching the clothes of the dead had to be carefully managed: the person leading the distribution of the belongings threw the clothes to those inheriting them because ‘it was a taboo to hand

6 I was advised that one does not pour drinks for others as that allows the pourer to bewitch (through the liquid, perhaps through touch?) the recipient. If sharing food and drink, the one offering a homemade comestible will taste it first (thereby affirming it to be *nawa*, good) before allowing each to serve him/herself or allowing the one consuming a bought item to take or pour of it for themselves.

it over, as it was believed that death could be passed on to the one receiving a cloth' (2006: 63).

Aasindilo provide another example of material objects being imbued with personal power (*oonkondo*): these power sticks were imbued with apotropaic power by an *onganga* (diviner-healer) and worn specifically to ward off *uulodhi* (witchcraft), with a particular type for children, who may also wear 'the bones of the mountain eagle' and 'the nails of the vulture' to avoid sickness, danger and death (Hiltunen 1993: 195–6). Comments from the children's group about beads (*omagwe*), offer continuity with observations by Martti Rautanen (one of the earliest missionaries to Ondonga): "a mother hangs amulets around the neck, on arms, around the waist and ankles of her new-born baby to guard him from the destruction of *aalodhi* [witches]" (Manuscript 1902, 45)' (Hiltunen 1986: 68). In particular, it suggests that notions of the agency and power of material objects is of contemporary relevance.

It is the *omuzizimba* that Aarni describes as "the shadow" or "shadow picture" of man, but it could stand for the "essence" of the individual, outside of his physical body' (1982: 66). Not only would that include the shadow (as arose in our discussions) but it would also extend to include the reflection (which Tatekulu Laban Iyambo mentioned) and to one's presence in dreams as 'part of reality' (Aarni 1982: 69). This may be cross-referenced with the *etikilo* ritual referred to above: 'the idea of killing by stabbing a reflected image is founded on the belief that in the reflected image as well as in the shadow there exists the soul-element of a person' (Hiltunen 1986: 122). This was key in the ritual detection of witches and sorcerers, whose malevolent influence is identified through water ceremonies in autochthonous medicine. Part of these rituals involved the stabbing of the *image* of the aggressor on the water's surface (Estermann 1976: 198). This idea, or echoes of it, are in operation still in promises of healings and wealth (*inter alia*) from contemporary ritualists. They offer, often through newspaper adverts, the opportunity to see one's enemy in an equivalent ceremony involving water, a mirror, or even a television set.

An assault on the shadow (person), contextualised thus, would certainly equate to an assault on the physical (person). It is culturally inappropriate, as the participants mentioned, to approach from behind. Added to this is the fact that you should not 'pass food or drinks behind someone's back',⁷ further emphasising the need for transparency of activity and a desire to avoid anyone tampering with one's person, out of sight. As Klaus Nürnberger explains, 'words, names, greetings, expressions and gestures are loaded with power and

7 Peace Corp Handbook: 'Te ti! – A Beginner's Guide to Oshindonga', 24. Available at: <https://wingolog.org/pub/te-ti/te-ti.pdf> (accessed 18.09.2015).

may have beneficial or detrimental consequences' (2007: 22), so to approach and greet in the accepted, formal manner would be (and still is) an imperative.

Further to the shadow and reflection (*ethano*), there is the sense that by one's imprint upon the land one leaves something of oneself: Hiltunen explains that an *omundonga* (Ndonga person) would never sit where the chief has sat because if the chief became ill, the person might be deemed responsible (1986: 130). This resonates with the idea that the place (*eha*) one occupies contains something of the self (Aarni 1982: 68), which leads to a residual presence there.⁸ So, whilst the shadow is an extension by way of its connection to the physical self, other forms of one's extended self extend beyond one's spatial and temporal presence. In particular, that death may be viewed as a '*change of conditions*' as opposed to an 'annihilation' (Aarni 1982: 71, italics original) immediately expands the notion of the person and the extent of their interactive, interpersonal reach. Of course, extended persons are also *reached* and *acted upon* more readily, for they are, in their extended state, more accessible.

2.3 *Ethnographic Contextualisation: Summary*

In the sense that animal blood is deemed to be representative of human life (it may be regarded as a vessel housing the spirit or life-force of the individual), blood is often described as being acted upon in the ethnographic literature. Sometimes, that is for positive ends: countering witchcraft, purifying and healing living persons and the homestead. However, it has negative connotations, too, most significantly in the pollution by blood-guilt (*uutoni*) that follows murder or manslaughter. And, whilst an *onganga* (diviner-healer) could use blood to counter witchcraft and/or sorcery, so the witch (*omulodhi*) could use it to effect their foul play. It may be a negative influence if coopted by spirits, too, in the case of haemorrhage. That blood is an active agent in Ndonga tradition is also notable: it ratifies the marriage, initiates healers and performs a connective tie to ancestral land and spirits. The agency and potency of blood as described above has been situated within an ethnographic context in which understandings of the person are much expanded when set alongside my own Western framework. The individual is constituted by the *oluto* (body), *omwenyo* (body-soul), *ombepo* (free-soul), *omutima* (heart) and *omuzizimba* (shadow). This physical-metaphysical whole includes multiple 'extensions' to the person (I should note, these would probably not sensibly be termed *extensions* when considered from within Ndonga worldviews), of which the clothing and shadow are but two examples. Within this conceptual framework,

8 The (pre-Christian and) contemporary belief that spirit presences reside where the bodies of the dead have been buried or discarded may be a related concept: see Chapter 5.

personal power (*oonkondo*), as well as vulnerability, is innately linked to all extensions of the person.

With the CCBIG discussions of the shadow and clothing contextualised in an ethnographic investigation into extensions of the person, it becomes clear the idea of 'self' has been (historically) and remains (at least, for some) greatly expanded within Ndonga worldviews. An individual is not limited to their physical embodiment in any one place, at any one time and, in this regard, contemporary beliefs demonstrate the persistence of pre-Christian worldviews. The notion of a 'person' also includes physical extensions of their being (bodily fluids, hair, nails, possessions), which may or may not be in the same location as the bodily individual. The person includes, in addition, the non-material and metaphysical 'extensions', such as the free-soul (in dreams and post-mortem), shadow, imprints and reflection; again, some of these may be accessed even without the spatial and temporal presence of that individual. Through all of these aspects they are vulnerable and can be acted upon: their reach, but also that of others, is extended. Both the *self* and the *other* (living or dead) can be accessed in a multitude of ways not conceived of in a scientific, Western mindset – through a footprint, an item of clothing, or in a dream-encounter. Thus, an expanded notion of the person necessarily entails an expanded capacity for interaction with – and action upon – others.

3 Iihongo Interpretations of Mark 5:21–43 in Dialogue with Feminist New Testament Scholarship

This section brings the ethnographically-contextualised CCBIG interpretations into conversation with feminist biblical criticism and considers the debate over whether the woman's 'flow of blood' (5:25) takes its place in the narrative primarily as a health problem or, alternatively, as a purity concern. The discussion that follows suggests that the Iihongo interpretations of 'extension[s] of the person' (Haber 2003: 182, n.33) encourage a reflection of the limitations of the term 'person' in an unreflective, Western context. A more holistic definition, it is argued, might nuance that concept better to fit New Testament contexts.

3.1 *The Issue of Blood*

Whether or not the narrative has as its primary concern the woman's purity status is a bone of contention within feminist interpretations and beyond (see Haber 2003). Of crucial importance in that regard is how one regards her 'flow of blood' (or 'fountain of blood') in verses 25 and 29. She would not appear to be a menstruant (Haber 2003: 174; *contra* Thurston 1998: 71): she is described

in terms that align her with the Levitical category of the *zavah* (15:25) having a flow of 12 years. Certain interpreters argue that the woman's condition, when set within her cultural context, would place a high level of importance on this aspect of her status. The 'blood taboo' is one of four elements of the woman's identity that Bonnie Thurston suggests would marginalise her; the others are her womanhood, lack of male relatives and lack of financial resources (1998: 71). Supported by echoes of the Levitical laws on genital bleeding (Leviticus 15:25), scholars such as Marla Selvidge (1984, 1990) are convinced of the centrality of purity concerns in Mark 5:21–43. In light of the above, it is argued, the text advances a critique of the Jewish purity code delimited in Leviticus 15. However, noting that Levitical laws are not explicitly mentioned and that neither Jesus nor the crowd are depicted as concerned by the haemorrhaging woman's presence in open space (Levine 2000: 424), others dismiss the relevance of the purity code entirely (D'Angelo 1999). Susan Haber, however, takes a middle ground and argues for the narrative primacy of the health condition (noting that the language is focused on healing and not purity), whilst suggesting that the significance of her resulting impurity cannot be ignored: 'her illness is explicit; her impurity is implicit' (2003: 173).

The Iihongo interpretations suggest that a purity *context* does not necessitate a purity-based *interpretation* and thus align with Charlotte Fonrobert's reminder that there is surely diversity in the 'Jewish' context of the 'Jewish' woman in the text (1997: 129). Just because 'the belief that blood contains life (see Leviticus 17:10–14; Deuteronomy 12:23)' is strongly held (Marcus 2000: 358), as it is in Iihongo, it does not follow that there is unequivocal 'fear' of blood in all situations (Haber notes that the evidence for exclusion of impure persons is contradictory: 2003: 177). I have illustrated above that there are several examples from the Ndonga context of blood acting as a polluting or dangerous force on an individual. These examples came both from the CCBIG discussions (blood-guilt) and ethnographic literature (use of blood in marriage rites inducing miscarriage, blood-letting for haemorrhage). However (and as is also relevant in the contexts of the Jesus movement and evangelists), ambiguous approaches to blood are apparent, with associations with life, nourishment and cleansing also arising in our discussions. The Ndonga setting, therefore, may legitimately be presented as a purity context, although in a seemingly less pervasive form than that of Jesus or the Evangelists. There was no mention, for example, of menstrual blood as polluting.⁹ In addition, whether or not a bride would still crawl through an ox carcass and whether or not blood-letting

9 However, I note that this absence could just as easily be explained by a lack of inclination to volunteer sensitive information about such matters and/or my own failure to enquire of it

would still be undertaken in the case of haemorrhage, I cannot determine. The positive associations of blood may outweigh its polluting force in Iihongo worldviews today and thus marginalise purity-based interpretations of the text.

Nonetheless, this remains a context in which blood can cause impurity and, as such, it was notable that the Iihongo interpreters did not suggest that the woman with a flow of blood would be considered impure and nor that she would be isolated or ostracised (*contra* Joel Marcus 2000: 366). Rather (and providing an interesting indirect link with Leviticus 12), Tatekulu Laban Iyambo suggested that she might be suffering from late pregnancy or postpartum bleeding: health (not purity) concerns. There was particular resonance with autochthonous, positive connotations of blood in contemporary worldviews and practice (blood from cattle slaughter as curative of blood-guilt, use of blood as an eye-cleanser). This, combined with the fact that certain practices involving blood as pollutant may have ceased, possibly contributed to the sense that the woman was primarily being healed of an illness and not of a condition of impurity.

That the woman with the flow of blood's approach to Jesus was 'surreptitious' (Marcus 2000: 366) or 'furtive' (Joynes 2012: 120) has most often been connected to her ritual impurity (Marcus 2000: 357; Haber 2003: 183). It would therefore be seen as a move that might compromise Jesus, were the impurity to be contagious via such a touch. However, others have noted that certain factors may counter this argument: the woman does the touching, which does not transfer the impurity of the *zavah* (Fonrobert 1997: 130), and, even if Jesus were contaminated, such a problem is 'easily remedied' (Haber 2003: 179). Of greater significance in Ndonga culture (according to the interpreters in Iihongo), was deemed to be the importance of not approaching from behind. This had nothing to do with concerns for purity. Rather, one should approach from the front lest someone perceives you to be acting against their best interests (i.e. not transparently, in front of them).

Several points have coalesced in this section to challenge the heavily gendered nature of the scholarly discussion on the woman's condition. The Iihongo contributions, in the first instance, were *not* gendered: the fact that discussions of blood in the CCBIG sessions did not focus specifically on vaginal or, indeed, *women's* blood, was unexpected. In fact, human *and* animal blood came to the fore and, where *human* blood was specified, it was the blood of the person (the un-gendered blood of a murder victim, for example) that was

directly, as it could by menstruation being thought of, at least historically, as positively 'depurative' (Davies 1994 2: 9).

considered, not the blood of a woman. This highlights the contextual nature of the binary female-male interpretations in Western academic circles, wherein gender issues are high on the agenda.

Further, the association of the woman with the flow of blood with a woman who is pregnant or who has just given birth (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo) detracts from frequent scholarly focus on the infertility of the woman in the narrative. For Tatekulu Laban, her condition is evidence of her very fertility, not infertility. Comments from the children about the value of Jairus' daughter to the productivity and well-being of the household unit – she was a 'key bone' in the household – were also indicative of positive valuation of the female characters in the story: they highlighted the importance of a female child. This might suggest that it was not all that unusual for Jairus to be so insistent (including forsaking his status by falling at the feet of Jesus) that his daughter be healed.

Ndonga society is matrilineal (whilst increasingly patriarchal) and may be expected to champion the status of women. However, ethnographies on the region suggest that gender dynamics challenge, once again, the binary oppositions so apparent in Western scholarship. For example, the notion of a 'third gender' (*omasenge*: homosexual males who assume women's roles; Davies 1994), suggests that in this traditional, agrarian context, the man-woman binary is not a given. Perhaps chiming with the complications presented to biblical scholarship regarding conceptions of biological sex and gender (for example, Thatcher 2011), the understanding of a transitional or third gender in Owambo worldviews is indicative of a more fluid conception of gender.

3.2 *Touching Jesus' Clothing: Extensions of the Person and 'Magical' Healings*

Our discussions of Mark 5:21–43 incorporated extensive exploration of the issue of what exactly constituted a 'person', particularly in reference to the woman touching Jesus' garment. Healing through touch (and especially the touch of a garment) is potentially problematic, leading as it does to performances of what (from a skeptical or scientific, Western viewpoint) look like 'magical' behaviours. However, the woman in Mark 5:21–43 is not the only person who demonstrates such attitudes to the clothing of charismatic persons. The people of Gennesaret, for example, 'begged' to 'touch even the fringe of his cloak' when Jesus was in their region and 'all who touched it were healed' (NRSV Mark 6:56). Furthermore, the 'handkerchiefs or aprons' that Paul had been in contact with healed the sick and spirit-possessed (NRSV Acts 19:12). This is a long-standing tradition: in 1 Samuel 24, David cuts off a corner of Saul's cloak in what is seemingly a display of aggression, a preamble (albeit not

seen through) to a physical assault. Haber remarks that the cloak would have been considered 'an extension of the person and his authority' (2003: 182).

Healings enacted through touching garments (5:27) and the utterance of 'exotic foreign words' (Marcus 2000: 363) – that is, 'foreign' to the audience (5:41) – are suggestive of worldviews and medical anthropologies far removed from those of the majority of Western biblical scholars. Vernon K. Robbins suggests that the 'traditional language and motifs' used in such narratives would allow for ready association with healing for a non-Christian hearer (1987: 504). It is argued, however, that a concern to suppress 'Mark's "magical" tendency' (LeMarquand 2004: 55) prompted the Matthean and Lukan authors to eliminate these elements altogether (for example, Love 2002: 96). However, it is interesting to note that a so-called 'magical' encounter (touching the garment and the power flowing out of Jesus) resonated so much as to be frequently featured on early Christian amulets (Joynes 2012: 120). It is arguably ethnocentric to claim that such interpretations may have 'tainted' the understanding of Jesus' behaviours (Witherington III 1984: 72) or that Mark 5:21–43 demonstrates that certain culturally-bound understandings of (i) the person and, (ii) healing methods might be termed 'human sham' (Marcus 2000: 367).

The interpretations put forward in Iihongo, combined with a consideration of the ethnographic literature on the area, suggest that conceptions of the person are broader and more holistic than the physical form that I consider to be my own person. Leaving aside for the moment the issue of what remains of me post-mortem, my person as understood in an Ndonga context (how one both *interacts* with me and *knows* me) would include my name, shadow, imprints, clothing, treasured personal items, image or reflection, and even my words, alongside my physical presence and bodily fluids. Furthermore, I am not limited to one presence, being understood to have a wandering 'dream-soul' (*ombe-po*) that may encounter others beyond the location of my body. As the person persists beyond death – in the form of an *oshiluli* (restless spirit) or presence amongst the *aathithi* (ancestors), both living within the community – notions of the person are extended still further (see Chapters 5–7). Within this conception of the person, culturally constructed, I do not have 'extensions'. Rather, the *whole notion* of the person is extended to include all of the aspects above. This is apparent in the Levitical code, too: the prescribed actions for having interacted with an impure person (to wash one's clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until the evening) are the same whether encountering their body (15:7) or their 'extensions' (for example, spit: 15:8; bed: 15:5; or imprint: 15:6 and 9–10). Marcus claims that impurity through contact with clothing is less serious than that through contact with the body (2000: 359, relying on Milgrom). However, it is debatable that this distinction is in evidence in the text, given

the above. The only distinction drawn is the duration of impurity for the male who contracts a menstruant's seven-day impurity through sexual intercourse.

Notions of the extended person in the New Testament are not just limited to the haemorrhaging woman's interaction with Jesus. It is important to refer directly at this point to Acts 5:15, within which the potency of Peter's extended person is commented upon: 'they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by' (NRSV). The Iihongo discussions of the shadow as a visible extension give a contemporary cross-cultural example of accessing the person through their non-physical being. In Iihongo, the deliberate interactions with shadows discussed were malicious (and accidental interactions, innocuous). In Acts, however, there is an example of positive potency in the shadow of a charismatic.

In light of the above, references to 'extensions to/of the person' betray the culturally constructed notion of the (bounded) 'person' to which the speaker refers by relegating the 'additional' aspects to another category. Working with an expanded notion of the person, the woman with the flow of blood really does *know* Jesus through touching his garment – a part of him, not an extension – and that is set within a textual unit that, as Marcus notes, is pervaded by the language of perception (2000: 365). It is not just the woman whose person extends beyond her body (in her case, by virtue of her bleeding). As Candida R. Moss argues – and in line with the idea of an extended (but simultaneously more accessible and vulnerable) person – the bodies of *both* Jesus and the woman 'are porous and leak uncontrollably' (2010: 508).¹⁰ Whilst Marcus suggests that her blood-impurity could have negated Jesus' power to heal (2000: 358, 366), in this case that does not happen. This only adds to the sense that, in a purity context, purity concerns need not override all else. And, within such a complex notion of the person, when culturally situated, Stuart Love's analysis (albeit focusing on the Matthean account) holds ground:

10 Moss suggests that the 'traditional association' is between 'porosity and weakness' (2010: 508). However, if the extended person notion is extrapolated, *all* persons become more accessible and therefore vulnerable. Conversely, and with regard to acting upon others, they *also* become more powerful (because everyone else is more vulnerable, too). Perhaps Jesus leaking power and the woman leaking blood are just extreme, unusual examples of how *accessible and vulnerable* all people (inclusive of their extensions) are. Is the fact that Jesus leaks power an example of that 'traditional association' being *reversed* or just an example of the compromise of the person via their 'extension'? If other remedies involved touch/power-transfer techniques, then are they not also examples of what one might call positive porosity?

Yet the woman's behavior parallels popular beliefs about magic in agrarian societies; that is, she believes the healer's clothing has healing power, a notion repeated in 14:36 (see Acts 5:15, 19:12). If an aura of magic remains in the story it could fit either the period of the evangelist, the time of Jesus, or both.

LOVE 2002: 96

4 Conclusions

A detailed consideration of the CCBIG transcripts, contextually situated using ethnographic materials, reveals a context within which blood (*ombinzi*) has an ambivalent nature. It is a positively valued substance, having curative, nourishing and bonding capacities. Notable contemporary examples were the making of cuts (*oonsha*) on the eyebrows or cheekbones to release blood to soothe eye pain, and the use of ox blood to cement marital unions and cure blood-guilt (*uutoni*). However, blood is simultaneously perceived as dangerous, with disease-bearing and polluting qualities. It is this sense of blood's agency, clearly apparent in the ethnographic literature on autochthonous worldviews, which is apparent in the CCBIG discussions. The use of ox blood in various ritual contexts in the historical and contemporary wedding (*ohango*), as well as to redress blood-guilt (on the orders of traditional judicial authorities), demonstrates its powerful agency and role today in the maintenance of connections between living and deceased community members. Importantly, this is within an agricultural context that prizes cattle above all other livestock as the inheritance from the ancestors, and it is their blood that often takes centre stage in rituals (historical and contemporary). Most significantly for the interpretation of the narratives at hand, human blood was understood to contain the life-force of the person, with the flow of blood (*uuva wetiko lyombinzi oomvula omulongo nambali*; lit.: 'sickness of flow of blood of twelve years') meaning that the woman is in a critical state and is losing her life, perhaps suffering from a post-partum complication.

Having discussed 'extensions of the person' with the groups and situated their explanations within the ethnographic background, it became clear that blood has sat, historically, alongside other bodily fluids, imprints, the shadow and possessions, within holistic local conceptions of the person. For the senior participants, autochthonous understandings of intrinsic links between the self and the shadow, as well as material possessions, was a contemporary reality. The children, whilst not recognising all autochthonous ideas (for example,

that the shadow was representative of one's death or that the clothing was part of the person), did subscribe to the fundamental premise of material agency, referring to apotropaic beads (*omagwe*) to ward off witchcraft. However, their partial unfamiliarity with notions of an extended person suggests that this may be a concept that is receding over time to the extent that some no longer recognise it (although they expressed conviction elsewhere that the person at least extends beyond their physical boundary and into the dream world and spirit realm [*Aanona*, CCBIG Luke 24]).

The lack of recognition noted above cannot also be said of witchcraft (*uulodhi*); in this round of CCBIG sessions (as elsewhere), the children were vocal about the threat of *uulodhi* to their well-being (*contra* Hiltunen 1986: 157). Perhaps it is the persistent concern for witchcraft (Groop 2010: 161) and its associated, enduring sense of insecurity (McKittrick 2002: 2) that prompts the continuing use of traditional diviner-healers (*oonganga*). The participants were explicit in their references to the use of such healers in a contemporary setting, despite clear reservations about their efficacy. Some were deemed to be 'false' *oonganga* and could offer no relief from affliction, only the impoverished future that the woman with the flow of blood had experienced.

Considering a witchcraft context, the Western notion of the person appears inadequate when seeking to express how individuals might interact with each other. The (extended) self, I have argued, as well as the other, is more accessible than s/he whose person is confined to her/his physical body. Within a witchcraft context, then, a person is considerably more vulnerable if their enemies can access them through spit, footprints, clothing, reflection, and the like. This also provides a contextual lens through which to consider the woman's touching of Jesus' garment.

William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison suggest that the idea that divine power goes from healer to clothing 'seems to presuppose that there is some sort of energy which can be stored in physical objects and subsequently drained' (2001: 129). The Iihongo interpretations, however, require not that 'some sort of energy' be stored, but that clothing simply be recognised as an 'extension' of the person. 'A wider world of personhood' (Fowler 2004: 19) – including the 'dividual', 'partible', or 'permeable' person – is to be found particularly in ethnographic literature on India, Melanesia and Australasia, with which the Iihongo interpretations chime.¹¹

11 I have not engaged with theories of the dividual, partible, and permeable person (summarised by Chris Fowler 2004: 23–52) to any great degree because they do not precisely encapsulate notions of personhood as presented to me in Iihongo CCBIGs or those

... the aspects of persons in Yolngu ethnography that are of interest here are not so much internal divisions and external connections as the *extension* of the person in space and time beyond somatic boundaries and the normal life-span. Both ancestral and sorcery doctrines in northeast Arnhem Land, I suggest, represent the extension of the boundaries of the person in space and time beyond the boundaries of sensations and everyday perception and beyond the temporal zone between conception and death.

KEEN 2006: 516

However, part of what I have tried to argue here is that those 'extensions' are, more likely, integral. The term 'extension of the person' is, itself, framed in contemporary, Western terms, and suggests (via categorisation) that the extensions are somehow lesser, secondary aspects. This may not be the case in local conception. We require, perhaps, a wholly different way of conceiving of the person fully to understand interactions between bodies (including bodily fluids), shadows, and clothing, as represented in New Testament texts.

Engaging with Feminist treatments of Mark 5:21–43, I have illustrated that a context in which blood is connected with pollution does not necessitate a pollution-oriented interpretation of the text. It may be as a result of the ambivalent attitudes to blood that the participants did not ascribe a polluted or ostracised status to the woman; the Iihongo interpreters might, for example, have suggested that she was beset by spirit forces (referencing cultural traditions of blood-letting in the treatment of haemorrhage). However, the Iihongo interpretations go beyond simply *not* associating the woman's bleeding with impurity. Discussions of blood were wider ranging than vaginal, female, or even human blood. Furthermore, the Iihongo interpretations were distinctly feminist in their approach, perhaps linked to the matrilineal context: the woman was, rather strikingly in one case, figured as a *fertile* woman (with post-partum bleeding) and not as an infertile woman, as is ordinarily suggested in Western scholarship.

presented in the ethnographic literature on the area (they have proved very useful thinking partners, however). These constructs are located in understandings of gift-giving and other transactions, which do not concern me here. Ian Keen's description here, however, moves away from those 'external connections' and focuses on the person beyond the 'somatic boundaries', which was what I wished to explore. Having struggled to locate discussions of personhood that treat Sub-Saharan African contexts and perspectives, it has become clear that this is an area meriting further research.

In summary, at least some of the participants across each group expressed views of aspects of the person (blood, body, shadow, clothing, possessions) that echo or demonstrate continuity with elements of pre-Christian, autochthonous beliefs and/or practices. A survey of the CCBIG transcripts and the ethnographic context demonstrates, in this case, that there is dynamic interaction at play at the interface between pre-Christian and Christian worldviews, and between text and context. This interaction, particularly with regard to an extended notion of the person, has given rise to a fresh lens through which to examine the touching of Jesus' garment by the woman with the flow of blood.

The Graves and Groves of Restless Spirits: Noctambulant Legion and the Living Landscape (Luke 8:26–39)

Consider the relationship between the sea and land along the coast between Seattle and Vancouver. In his book *Passage to Juneau* (1999) the travel writer Jonathan Raban tells of his trip by boat along that shore. Alongside his travel narrative he tells of the voyage of the explorer Captain Vancouver in his ship the HMS *Discovery* in 1792. Vancouver's task was to map the coast and name it as he went – making it a place of empire. Naming is one of the ways space can be given meaning and become place. Vancouver's journal reports the seemingly nonsensical movements of natives in their canoes in the sea around them. Rather than taking a direct line from point A to point B the natives would take complicated routes that had no apparent logic. To the native canoeists their movements made perfect sense as they read the sea as a set of places associated with particular spirits and particular dangers. While the colonialists looked at the sea and saw blank space, the natives saw place.

CRESSWELL 2015: 15



As the above excerpt illustrates, understandings of space and place – very much under the spotlight in the social sciences¹ – vary across cultures. Land and landscape² are no exception, neither in their contextuality nor in their prominence in contemporary academic discourse. The landscapes we view

1 See, for example: Tuan 1977; Lefebvre 1991; Casey 1993; Massey 1994; Lawrence-Zúñiga & Low 2003; Hubbard & Kitchin 2011; Giesekeing, Mangold, Katz, Low & Saegert 2014b; Low 2017.

2 As Giesekeing et al. note, 'landscape is not a perfect term: historically it has privileged the visual aspect of the environment and failed to fully address the other senses' (2014a: 255). I adopt this term whilst acknowledging its limitations, using it particularly when referring to perceptions of the environment. However, I use 'land' when referring to the material body of the natural environment (or part thereof), which may, in this context, be understood as an agent.

may be, amongst other things, beautiful, awe-inspiring, formidable, threatening, or nurturing. Those attributes notwithstanding, most of us in a contemporary, industrialised Western context do not view the land as a character, or as having a characterful nature with intrinsic agency. Rather, it is most often viewed – anthropocentrically – as the stage upon which human activity plays out. In that regard, it is *tabula rasa*: a ‘blank slate’. Cross-cultural understandings of space, place, and landscapes, on the other hand, suggest that the *tabula rasa* notion is a peculiarly post-Enlightenment, Western perception of land and landscapes; it both divorces culture and nature (Descola 2013) and relegates the materiality of lived religious experience. Few Europeans maintain beliefs about faeries, tree spirits, or wider animistic traditions, which are often filed under historical folklore, or ‘lost religion’ (Davidson 1993: 121). In striking contrast, many in indigenous and so-called ‘traditional’ communities around the globe perceive the land to be a character in its own right and in its entirety, infused with agency(-ies) and consciousness(es). Alternatively, they may view particular landscapes (or pockets of land) as characterful places.³

The aim of this chapter is to present and explore the land/landscape perspectives expressed by the Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Groups. The perspectives are presented here in something of a journey, moving outwards from the homestead core, into agricultural and burial landscapes, and then beyond into wilderness territory. In our group sessions, the participants were invited to reflect on (a) local landscapes, and (b) landscapes in the Lukan narrative of the Gerasene Demoniac (8:26–39). These grassroots reflections are contextualised here with the aid of ethnographic literature. The chapter then moves toward a comparison and contrast with Western-centric professional biblical interpretation of the same text, asking whether the Iihongo interpretations might expand, challenge, or nuance understandings of land/landscapes in the biblical studies academy.⁴

3 See, for example, the concept of agency being explored beyond the human in *The Occult Life of Things* (Santos-Granero 2013), *Potent Landscapes* (Allerton 2013), *Forests that Think* (Kohn 2013), *African Sacred Groves* (Sheridan & Nyamweru 2008), and *The Social Life of Trees* (Rival 1998).

4 Material from this chapter was published in 2017 as ‘Legion in a “Living Landscape”: Contextual Bible as a Disruptive Tool (Luke 8:26–39 interpreted in Owamboland, Namibia)’. *Expository Times* 128 (7): 313–324.

1 Luke 8:26–39 in Iihongo CCBIGs and the Ethnographic Context



FIGURE 5 Dedicated area for pounding *mahangu* (millet)

Discussions in Iihongo revealed Ondonga (the traditional kingdom within which Iihongo lies) to be a characterful context: many in the community understand the land they live on, and are surrounded by, to be itself an agent, or to be imbued with agencies whose very nature and characteristics are bound up with their placed-ness. Anxieties concerning presences in a characterful landscape are indicated the following comments from my translator, recounting the events that ensued when road engineers failed to heed the community's pleas to circumvent a characterful pocket of land:

Whilst I was the pastor at the Western Diocese, the engineers wouldn't divert the road around. [After the road was built], people heard people at work in the kitchen and pounding [where there was no kitchen]. There appeared *oshimbombo* [mahangu porridge] and *oshikundu* [mahangu drink] prepared by unknown persons. The engineers had built on an *eputo* [a vacated plot, where people had lived and, presumably, been buried]. We used to shout, 'we are guests here – don't come and disturb us'. I have not seen *oshiluli* [restless spirits]. The donkey sees things. If you are riding on a donkey or riding a cart pulled by a donkey, sometimes it stops, stands very still and stares. It is because it has seen something like an *oshiluli*.

REVEREND THOMAS UUSHONA Pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) Interview, 23rd June 2015

Such a context offers fertile territory in which to consider landscape texts from the New Testament. Under consideration here is the narrative of the Gerasene Demoniak (Luke 8:26–39; parallel texts in Mark 5:1–20 and Matthew 8:28–34), wherein there are clear references to spirits and various landscape sites but few clues as to the significance of each (at least, to a '*tabula rasa* eye', such as my own).

The narrative begins with Jesus and his disciples sailing to 'the territory of Gerasa' (Luke 8:26, GNT), on the eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee. This area fell within the politico-cultural region of the Roman Empire called the Decapolis – the region of the 'ten cities'. Coming ashore, they are met by 'a man from the town who had demons in him' (8:27a). This character is named 'Legion' in the Greek text (8:30; GNT: 'Mob'), due to the numerous spirits tormenting him. The text explains that 'for a long time' the demoniac 'had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs' (8:27). Further to this, he has been imprisoned and enchained, but to no avail: the demons drive him to break the chains and roam the wilderness (8:29). When Jesus orders the

'evil spirit' out of the man (8:29; NRSV: 'unclean spirit'), the demons negotiate their destination: they beg not to be sent to the abyss (8:31) but agree to occupy a nearby herd of pigs (8:32). When they do so, the herd charge down the cliff and are drowned in the lake (8:33). Once the community hear about these events and come out of the town to investigate, the man is 'sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they were all afraid' (8:35). The locals ask Jesus to leave the area, which he does (8:37), and the former demoniac is sent back to his community with instructions to tell others about 'what God has done for [him]' (8:39).

Because 'Legion' rejects familiar, household space and instead takes flight, subsequently occupying burial and wilderness sites, the ensuing discussion probes the participants' understandings of Legion's locations, as well as his demons. Journeying outwards from the homestead core, and extending to the wilderness periphery, I track participants' discussions of spirits to illustrate their understanding of what I have termed a *living landscape*. The participants' interpretations are then brought into dialogue with professional biblical scholarship. I engage with Halvor Moxnes' work on place, particularly because he suggests that the 'spatial dimension of Jesus' activities' has been neglected (2003: 2). Additionally, I juxtapose the Iihongo interpretations with postcolonial scholarship on Legion's demons (Ched Myers 1988; Richard A. Horsley 2001), these having been very influential in the interpretation of possession narratives. Through these dialogues, I explore how the Iihongo perceptions of the *living landscape* offer an alternative lens through which we might interpret the stage upon which Legion's story plays out.

1.1 *Lived Experience of Spirits*

As Michael W. Newheart remarks of the narrative at hand, the demons 'charge into the foreground' by giving their name and pleading with Jesus not to be sent out of the region (Mark) or into the abyss (Luke) (2004: 44–5). Because the participants in this study, for the most part, identified their context as one in which spirit encounters were ordinary events (albeit not everyday occurrences), spirit-beings come to the fore here and now, too.

Across the study as a whole, participants discussed four types of spirit – *oompwidhuli*, *oombepo dha nyata*, *ihuli* and *aathithi*, with all but the last arising in our discussions of Luke 8:26–39. Their meanings are as follows (my own translations):

Oombepo dha nyata (s. *oombepo ya nyata*):

Dirty, chaotic, or evil spirits. (Luke 8:26–39: 'unclean spirits'.)

Oompwidhuli (s. *ompwidhuli*):

Ombepo (breath, wind, spirit) *ya nyata* is associated with dirt, chaos and bad behaviour. *Nyata* is defined as ‘become dirty, pinch’ (Viljoen, Amakali & Namuandi 2012: 39).

Wild, mad, or evil spirits. (Luke 8:26–39: ‘demons’.)

In a fairly comprehensive dictionary, the entry *ompwidhuli* is given as ‘evil spirit’ (Tirronen 1986: 235). It is perhaps worth noting, however, that *ompwidhuli* has connotations of wildness and insanity. The root *-pwidhi* is defined as ‘wild, crazy, insane’ (Viljoen, Amakali & Namuandi 2012: 45), and *-pwidhi* is the only term given under those English entries (2012: 108, 71, 83). This may explain the association with *onkwenya*: ‘The other name for *ompwidhuli* is *onkwenya*, which is a disease that ... disturbs the mind.’ (Memekulu Frieda Namugongo).

Iiluli (s. *oshiluli*):

Restless spirits of the named, recently-deceased. (Luke 8:26–39: *not mentioned*.)⁵

The deceased may be restless because instructions for their burial have not been followed. The term has pejorative connotations: ‘It was thought that after the death [*sic*] the “witch”, *omulodhi*, changed into *oshiluli*. Also, all non-buried persons, e.g. murderers, women who died in

5 Whilst *oshiluli/iiluli* does not appear as a term in this text, the *Oshindonga* Bible (based on the Good News Translation, GNT) uses the term where the English (GNT) has ‘ghost’ in Matthew 14:26, Mark 6:49, Luke 24:37 and 39. The disciples think Jesus is an *oshiluli* when he walks on water, as well as when they experience him resurrected amongst them.

Aathithi (collective noun;
s. *omuthithi*):

childbirth, people who died from starvation, or those who have been killed by *omulodhi*, all these persons' souls were transformed into *iiluli* after their death.' (Aarni 1982: 17)
Spirit(s) of the nameless, ancestral deceased. (Luke 8:26–39: *not mentioned*.)

The use of the plural as a collective noun is indicative of the existence of the ancestral spirits *in community*, in direct reflection (or continuation) of the living community (Aarni 1982: 71). The participants suggested that the *aathithi* are situated in particular burial grounds – ground that must not be built upon. They reported making noises of acknowledgment or libations in order to pass through such territory without incident.

All of these terms are used in the *Oshindonga* Bible (*Oshindonga* version of the Good News Translation [GNT]), in either singular or plural form, or both [number of occurrences]:

Singular

ompwidhuli [13]

ombepo ya nyata [10]

oshiluli [5]

omuthithi [0]

Plural

oompwidhuli [25]

oombepo dha nyata [13]

iiluli [0]

aathithi [6]

The above statistics suggest that mentions of spirit beings from pre-Christian cosmology (*oshiluli/iiluli*, *omuthithi/aathithi*) may have been minimised in the process of translating the Bible into *Oshindonga*. Instead, descriptive terms appear to have been adopted, or even deliberately coined, in order to avoid syncretic understandings (*oompwidhuli*, *oombepo dha nyata*; with endings associated with dirt, chaos, wildness or madness).

Turning to the Lukan Legion narrative, where the English translation (GNT) uses 'demon(s)' (8: 27, 29b, 30, 31, 32, 35, 38), the *Oshindonga* translation has *oompwidhuli*. Where the English translation refers to 'unclean spirit(s)'

(8:29a), the *Oshindonga* offers *oombepo dha nyata*. The participants saw these two terms as synonymous. When asked what an *ompmwidhuli* was, the children had various answers: Imanuel Amagulu replied that it was *onkwenya*, madness, and this was likely echoed in Christa Iyambo's description of the *omunampwidhuli* (someone with *oombepo*) as 'a person that is not nice in the head'. Another suggestion was that it was an evil spirit (*ombepo ya nyata*) (Sipora Simon), concurring with Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo (the only participant in the men's group). It could also be 'something sent by Satan to come into your body and will make you do bad things' (Timoteus Pinehas). Reference to the *oombepo*'s satanic origins was also made by Memekulu Rauha Andreas. She explained that 'the demon is the power of Satan and occurs in the man's body and disturbs the spirit.' Meme Diina Itila referred to the spirits as 'the power of darkness', connecting them with the bush as a place of 'darkness'.

The general consensus, then, seemed to be that *oombepo* were evil spirits and/or madness. They are very much a contemporary phenomenon and the participants easily related to the *oombepo* experienced by Legion in the text. There was less of a consensus, however, when it came to the origin or residence of the *oombepo*. Mention was made twice of the potential satanic origin, but my initial question was more concerned with the location in which *oombepo* were thought to reside (if, indeed, they can be thought of as occupying space). Perhaps reflecting an understanding of the world as an insecure place (cf. McKittrick 2002), Meme Diina Itila suggested that the demons are 'everywhere in the world'. Meme Elizabeth Ekandjo put forward the idea that the *oombepo* resided in the sky. This idea was echoed in the response from Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo, who stated that, being in the sky, 'anywhere you go, the *ompmwidhuli* can follow'. Evil spirits with the lexical connection to the wilderness (*-pwidhi*: wild), then, are conceived of as roaming entities.

The response from the children concerning the location or origin of the *oombepo* was varied and notable for its independence of thought from the adults' ideas. Possible origins were 'hell' (Okanona ANON9), 'the brain' (Frieda Shilemba) and 'the graveyard' (Ananias Imbondi). Two children expressed the idea that *oombepo* 'come from someone', each giving their own example: 'If you steal something from someone then that person will send you *oombepo*' (Okanona ANON6) and 'if you are excellent in school then another will disturb your mind with evil spirits' because that person 'is against you' (Loide Petrus). How the children conceived of the *oombepo* existing prior to being sent into a person (for those who understood this to be the causal chain) was unclear. Amongst their suggestions of how the individual might protect him/herself against such a threat (attending hospital, reading the Bible, prayer, avoiding touching others' belongings) was to visit a diviner-healer (*onganga*).

The interpreters spoke at length about the multitude of ways that spirits made their presence felt, the behaviours they precipitated in the living community, and the measures required in appeasing them or driving them from inhabited places. In fact, it was to the two terms from autochthonous cosmology – *despite* their apparent marginalisation in the Bible – that the participants defaulted, both in our discussion of Luke 8, as well as in the CCBIG sessions more generally. Of primary concern in Iihongo, and most frequently encountered by participants, seemed to be *iluli* (the restless spirits of the recently deceased), who would return to the community to disturb surviving relatives and friends. An additional cause for concern was *aathithi*, the nameless ancestral spirits. This is surely significant: categories of autochthonous spirits from pre-Christian cosmology, widely referred to in missionary literature, assume a position foremost in the participants' minds, over and above the terms used in the biblical narrative under discussion.

The above understandings propagate images of a community in frequent contact with the dead; social relations extend to interactions with deceased (immediate) kin and the overarching ancestors of kin and clan. In Iihongo, the living community *alone* does not constitute 'society'. In fact, the social world is comprised of the living, the living-dead (the restless, recently deceased), and the long-deceased. I will argue here that it is the landscape – often thought of as that 'separate' realm of nature in Western settings – that mediates between the living and the dead. Spirits inhabit the land, thereby generating its 'potency' (Munn 2003: 102). The social world, in Iihongo, is thereby *of* and *in* the natural world: this is a *living landscape*. This notion provided the interpreters with a useful lens through which to examine the Legion narrative, and its use illustrates their continued engagement with autochthonous world-views and practices.

1.2 *Iihongo's Living Landscapes: Domestic and Agricultural Sites*

For a long time this man had gone without clothes and would not stay at home ...

LUKE 8:27b, GNT

The Ondonga homestead (the *egumbo*; pl. *omagumbo*)⁶ comprises numerous thatched huts and shelters, which are dispersed across various dwelling zones.

⁶ Narrowly, the term *egumbo* (pl. *omagumbo*) is used to denote the homestead itself, enclosed within a (traditional) palisade fence or (modern) breeze-block wall. However, the term may also be used to denote the homestead and its surrounding agricultural land.



FIGURE 6 Entry to a visitor reception area

Each hut or zone, whether modern or traditional in construction, has a designated purpose. Amongst these are the main entrance to the east, a visitor-reception enclosure, assigned sleeping quarters (gendered for unmarried residents), an sheltered/outdoor kitchen, a enclosed/indoor kitchen, storage huts, and an enclosure for pounding grain.

A perimeter fence encloses the homestead (although the main entrance may be open), and a complex arrangement of internal fencing demarcates the functional zones within. This domestic setting is reported in ethnographic literature to be a physical manifestation of concerns with safety and security, particularly as related to uncertain times living under warring kingdoms (McKittrick 2002: 3). However, such concerns also related to the danger of invading malevolent forces, particularly by the capricious ‘spirits of the west’ (Davies 1994 3: 12, 30). As McKittrick explains,

... *omagumbo* provided more than just security against fellow humans. They also offered protection from hostile spirits. ... Within the *egumbo*, the homestead head and/or his wife greeted the rising sun, made offerings to spirits and ancestors, and conducted new harvest ceremonies. Residents subscribed to a set of daily behaviours designed to ensure that

misfortune would not visit the compound. Cooking pots from the evening meal were not washed at night, water was not poured on the ground inside the *egumbo*, and activities in the room where milk calabashes were stored followed strict rules to protect livestock. The periodic moving of the *egumbo* was accompanied by rituals and feasting to ensure the prosperity and safety of the new home.

MCKITTRICK 2002: 33

The *egumbo*, it would seem, represents a site of order, calm, and safety in a wild landscape. As Memekulu Frieda Namugongo stated: ‘*ongandjo* [the fence] is for protection purposes. And *ongandjo*, traditionally, is also to show where is the entrance to the *egumbo*.’ The fence acts as a clear boundary, away from which one moves into progressively ‘darker’ and more ‘dangerous’ territory.⁷ The conceptual poles may be envisioned thus:

Homestead	:	Bush/Desert/Wilderness
Inside	:	Outside
Order	:	Chaos
Cleanliness	:	Dirt
Light	:	Darkness
Safety	:	Danger
Tamed	:	Wild
Living (Living-Dead)	:	(Living-Dead) Ancestors; Wild Spirits

These poles are upheld by maintaining the integrity of the fence (whether by physical or spiritual means), as well as by encouraging normative behaviour in the living community. A possessed individual in Iihongo – *omunampwidhuli* – would contravene behavioural norms, thereby upending the order within the homestead fence, as well as disregarding the boundary itself and leaving the homestead at inappropriate times. Their behaviour would be recognisably disruptive and destructive. In this regard, the interpreters felt that the description of Legion’s behaviour in Luke 8 cohered with their own experiences of possessed persons: Legion had ‘gone without clothes’ and he ‘would not stay at home’ (8:27); he shuns sociality and instead occupied inappropriate locations of the burial caves (8:27) and the wilds (8:29), he exhibits

7 I was repeatedly reminded to close the gate between my area of the homestead and the surrounding land. This gate, orientated westwards, was placed across the opening in the fence rather than secured. In addition, the main entrance to the *egumbo* had no gate – people and animals could enter at will. From this main entrance, a passageway led directly into my enclosure. This leads me to believe that the insistence on closing the Western gate may well have been a spiritual-symbolic measure, rather than a practical one.

violence and extraordinary strength by ‘breaking [his] chains’ (8:29); and, finally, the spirits demonstrate their capacity for destruction (of life and property) by entering the pigs and driving the herd down a cliff to its demise in the lake (8:33).

The interpreters wished, in particular, to emphasise that Legion was not in control of his own actions: the phrase used frequently was that he was not acting ‘according to his own will’. This conclusion is logical given the above distinctions; Legion is contravening the behaviour patterns expected in the homestead and which maintain order ‘inside’. Legion’s behaviour, as with the Iihongo *omunampwidhuli*’s nonconformity, aligns him instead with the ‘outside’, with chaos, danger, and destruction. The effects of such affliction are considerable and are perceived in the Iihongo community today; as the participants stated, those affected by *oompwidhuli* are not ‘normal’ and their behaviours tell the story: nakedness in public, running away, beating others, destroying property, killing, and so on.

Meme Elizabeth Ekanjo reported that an (Ndonga) *omunampwidhuli*’s behaviour and demeanour will be unpredictable – one minute quiet and the next aggressive. She also suggested that ‘*oompwidhuli* have their own language’ and that the person will hallucinate. Memekulu Maria Kondo stressed destructive aspects of their behaviour: ‘they throw stones through windows, beat people, they are careless. They destroy everything.’ Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo noted that the behaviour of an *omunampwidhuli* induces fear in those they encounter. Whilst he did not give specific examples of how the person might behave, he stressed that ‘when you have *oompwidhuli*, that means you are ill, you are sick, not normal.’

Whilst the adults gave relatively few examples of such behaviour between them, the children were vocal in their assessment of the social ills connected to the will of the *oompwidhuli*. Their behaviour disturbs others:

Ananias Imbondi:	Bad behaviour. They sing during nighttime.
Loide Petrus:	They go to public places like a cuca shop [shebeen] and remove all their clothes.
Christa Iyambo:	They might come to your house and break in.
Fieda Shilemba:	They can beat you.
Monica Emvula:	He can beat you.
Immanuel Amagulu:	He can bite you.
Tangeni Fillemon:	He can drink alcohol and kill someone – even the wife.
Ananias Imbondi:	He can burn the house.
Okanona ANON6:	He can kill even his mother.

- Elizabeth Imbondi: He can go to the cuca shop and take all of the liquor and pour it out.
- Wilbartina Teofilus: The spirits make you run away.

With a strong association being drawn by many between *oompwidhuli* (evil/wild spirits) and *oombepo dha nyata* (unclean spirits), it is perhaps unsurprising that the behaviour of the afflicted is what was focused on – the social ills that ensued. It is notable, however, that the social ills arise as a result of the presence of the spirits and not the other way around. That is, possession in lihongo is understood as the *cause* of social strife rather than as a *symptom* of social strife. The behaviours above also reflect remarkably similar concerns reported by the children in another session regarding *uiluli* (restless spirits; s. *oshiluli*):

- Author: Why would they be scared of an *oshiluli*? What could an *oshiluli* do to them?
- Erastus Kuutondokwa: *Oshiluli* can strangle.
- Hilma Ikukutu: *Oshiluli* can beat you.
- Ananias Imbondi: *Oshiluli* can eat all the food wherever he finds it.
- Elizabeth Imbondi: *Oshiluli* can destroy.
- Anna Ikukutu: *Oshiluli* can go through the locked room.

Aanona, CCBIG MARK 4:35–41 & 6:45–52

In order to maintain the order and cleanliness of the homestead (particularly that within the encircling fence between dwellings and agricultural land), it is necessary to appease and send on their way any disruptive, intrusive spirits:

- Memekulu Maria Kondo: If [the deceased] used to come into the homestead [as a restless spirit], they slaughter a chicken and make *oshimbombo* [porridge] and they put that food at the place he liked to be during the evening, and in the morning you find nothing left. Even nowadays. That is the only method to say goodbye. After he has eaten he is gone forever.

If the notion of a *living landscape* is a fair representation, we might expect references in ethnographic works to spirit presences in connection with the *egumbo* (homestead). Indeed, that is the case (for example, McKittrick 2002: 33). That the palisade fence provided protection against spirits in autochthonous perceptions is attested by Davies, who likens it to the perimeter of the *oshilongo* (the Ndonga kingdom), with no man's land beyond (1994 1: 5). This is further emphasised by the fact that making breaks in the fence was taboo (*oshidhila*; Estermann 1976: 86). Hiltunen points to missionary accounts of witch detection rituals that took place in the *egumbo*, protective magic when relocating it, as well as the 'closing' of homestead spaces to spirits or witches (Hiltunen 1986: 72, 146f, 69), with Davies also mentioning the protection of sleeping huts with charms (1994 3: 2).

Members of the *egumbo* used, under normal circumstances, to be buried within the homestead or on its perimeter. Different sites would be appropriate for different members of the household: a household head would be buried in the cattle enclosure, whilst a child might be buried on the *egumbo* perimeter (Tönjes 1996: 142) or in the calf enclosure, and a woman in the pounding area (Aarni 1982: 42). With regard to burial within or around the *egumbo*, CCBIG reports suggested that those persons might return and disturb the household, if the burial instructions of the deceased have not been followed (Aarni, too, notes the importance of the deceased being 'satisfied with their burial' in an Owambo context [1982: 72; cf. Mbiti 1990: 83; Green 1983: 9–10]):

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Okanona ANON3: | Such persons in order to die and not come back sometimes they may instruct the family: If I am dead, bury me in the <i>egumbo</i> [homestead] or at the <i>ehale</i> [entrance] and if this is ignored they may come back. |
| Loide Petrus: | And sometimes people may instruct to cut off the tip of the tongue or the nose and if you don't do that they are angry and they come back. |
| Translator: | Because he knows he is a witch and that is how you stop him coming back, to reduce his power. |

Aanona, CCBIG LUKE 24

The Kwanyama made it a practice to separate the legs and arms from the trunk and cut out the tongue [to prevent the witch's return as a malicious spirit].

ESTERMANN 1976: 190

Aarni (1982: 42) argues that corpse-modification prevents passage to the Kingdom of Death, with such a barrier engendering the 'greatest shame'. Modification in response to witchcraft is also mentioned by McKittrick (2002: 74) and Hermann Tönjes (1996: 182), with the latter, at least (albeit in reference to the Kwanyama), reporting it acting as a curtailment of powers. Nürnberger is not specific about the nature of the African 'rituals' that he understands to be 'designed to prevent the deceased from returning, or getting into the hands of witches' (2007: 24). Contributions in the CCBIG sessions, then, seem to echo autochthonous notions of 'proper' burial and prevention of the return of spirits (especially of witches). Certainly, the Presiding Bishop of ELCIN noted a resurgence in concern about both witchcraft and spirits amongst the local population (Interview, Reverend Dr Shekutaamba V.V. Nambala, 23.06.2015).

According to the Iihongo groups, there is a clearly prescribed remedy for a person's post-mortem return to the homestead:

Elizabeth Imbondi: One person was dead but came back as an *oshiluli* and he came back to their own house [homestead: *egumbo*]. A family member decided to cook *oshimbombo* [porridge] and a whole chicken [*ondjuhwa*] with enough oil [*omahooli/omagadhi*]. They put it at the *ehale* [entrance] to the *egumbo*. Then the *oshiluli* came and ate it and then they were not seen again.

Aanona, CCBIG LUKE 24

Such encounters were said to occur only at night ('*Iiluli* cannot be seen during the day.' Memekulu Julia Iiyambo: *Oomeme*, CCBIG Mark 4:35–41 & 6:45–52), perhaps echoing Davies's description of *iiluli* as 'typical' bad spirits of the west, the direction of the sunset (1994 3: 12; on encounters with spirits at night, in the dark or in dreams, see also Aarni 1982: 74). The return of restless spirits was widely reported in CCBIG sessions (as well as in discussions with church leaders), as was the solution: 'Even nowadays. That is the only method to say goodbye. After he has eaten he is gone forever' (Memekulu Maria Kondo: *Oomeme*, CCBIG Luke 24). At least to an extent, these fluid boundaries of the community reflect those in a pre-Christian setting – the dead engage with the living.

Encounters with the *aathithi*, the ancestral spirits, further demonstrate the continuing influence of spirits deriving from domestic burial sites. The use of the plural as a collective noun (s. *omuthithi*) is indicative of the existence of the spirits *in community*, in direct reflection (or continuation) of the living

community (Aarni 1982: 71). These might be specific burial grounds reserved over time for the burial of a household or kin-group's dead. They could conceivably also be sites of burial previously enclosed within an *egumbo* boundary, which (following relocation of an *egumbo* after the householder's death) would later fall outside of that fence. However, in our discussions the former seemed to be suggested:

Hileni Iiyambo: *Aathithi* [ancestors] are our forefathers who died long ago but their spirit is good, not like the *iiluli* [restless spirits] who disturb you. According to the story from our grandmother, *aathithi* are spirits of the deceased, staying in some areas. For example, if you drive the car where the *aathithi* [ancestors] are staying you have to make a hoot. If you do not hoot, then your car will get stuck. And for the woman, if you carry something like a clay pot of *omalovu giilya* [traditional beer], then you stop and pour some out on the ground. If you do not do that the pot would fall and break. They are not disturbing anyone. They do not enter into the homestead. They just stay where they are. For example, in the field. But you cannot go into the field of *aathithi* and build your house. Then they will deal with you.

Aanona, CCBIG LUKE 24

There were said to be areas of the village, or particular areas of an individual homestead (the home and surrounding farming land), which house the graves of village or family ancestors (their identities were a point of uncertainty, in contrast to *iiluli* who are the remembered, named deceased). The influence of these ancestral spirits was felt to be positive and was placed in opposition to the meddling and disturbing influence of the *iiluli*. However, the *aathithi* are not to be trifled with – several people reported making requests to pass through the fields in question and making libations. The usually benevolent influence of the *aathithi* (the exception being if one built on 'their' land) would suggest that this was not the kind of interaction envisaged for Legion.

The closeness of the *aathithi* to the community and their engagement with it is also noted by Aarni, who contrasts their proximity with the remoteness of *Kalunga* (the Owambo supreme being). That there are specific sites identified with the *aathithi* nuances Nürnberger's statement that 'in *traditionalism* ancestors are ... not subject to time and space. They are everywhere all the time'

(2007: 14). They may not be limited by time and space but, in Iihongo (at least), they are *placed*. Despite missionary attempts to rid communities of their connections to the ancestors, concern with the *aathithi* persists.

These contributions suggest that domestic sites – homesteads and cultivated land – are understood to be populated not just by the living community, but also by the recently- and long-deceased. In this milieu, the homestead is the safest place to be: it is protected by a palisade fence, within which there are ‘labyrinthine passages’ that ‘weave in and out to confuse a stranger or an evil spirit’ (Malan 1995: 22). Although restless spirits do occasionally visit, their presence is not welcome and their departure is effected through food rituals. Indeed, several participants referred to people waking up in the night sensing themselves being strangled by evil spirits, a phenomenon familiar to church officials, too:

Even when sleeping, you might feel something strangling you. That is *oshiluli*.

MEMEKULU MARIA KONDO, *Oomeme*, CCBIG LUKE 24

There are stories. People even come to us for counselling because something is strangling them at night. Sometimes we can see marks, so you can see something was really happening. So, we cannot deny that there are ghosts (*iluli*).

REVEREND DR SHEKUTAAMBA V.V. NAMBALA Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) Interview, 23rd June 2015

Less threatening would appear to be the ancestors, whose presence in the locality is benevolent, unless living members of the community encroach on their land. Nevertheless, as Memekulu Maria Kondo suggested, ‘[the deceased] is in his or her own area. They have a right to be there.’ This goes some way to illustrate that Iihongo is a setting in which people live their lives in and amongst a complex of rooted spirits. Both the deceased homestead members (who might return temporarily as *iluli*, restless spirits) and the unnamed ancestors (*aathithi*) are placed.

Considering the above understanding of the domestic environment, a dramatic contrast is immediately brought out for me with the dichotomous understanding that I hold of social world *versus* natural world, community and culture *versus* landscape and nature, one which Giesecking et al. suggest is not uncommon:

For most, this non-human environment is the “natural” world, and “nature” is largely imagined as something prior to and separate from human

activity. Yet there really is no natural environment in the sense of being untouched, and we are increasingly recognizing the impact people have upon the earth and well beyond.

GIESEKING, MANGOLD, KATZ, LOW & SAEGERT 2014a: 255

In the first instance, then, the expanded social world discussed above has become apparent in reference to the domestic environment: the homestead and its surrounding agricultural land (together, the *egumbo*). Through the encounter with the Iihongo interpretations, my own interpretive lenses have been disrupted and shown to be highly contextual. Landscape understandings in Iihongo seem to tend more toward a fusion of the worlds: the social world *in* and *of* the natural world. The social world, the community, is expanded as a result of incorporating the landscape's spirit community, residing in and around the domestic hub. Certainly, the human impact on the landscape that Giesecking et al. refer to above is readily apparent: burying community members affects how member of Iihongo view the landscape. However, I would also highlight the reciprocal and ensuing impact that the landscape then has on the living community by virtue of the spiritual presences therein.

The journey through the *living landscape* now continues – we move away from domestic space, through grave sites, and out into the wilderness. This will highlight the extent to which the disruptive and destructive behaviours attributed to spirits and the spirit-possessed are the very opposite of what one would expect in an Ndonga homestead – ‘inside’ – but which conform to landscape characteristics (and their respective spirit presences) ‘outside’.

1.3 *Iihongo's Living Landscapes: Gravesites*

... but spent his time in the burial caves.

LUKE 8:27b, GNT

Before commencing an examination of how the groups understood Legion's presence in the gravesite, a note on terminology is needed. Where the English translation uses ‘burial caves’ (8:27), the Oshindonga text reads *oombila dhomomakololo*. *Ombila* (pl. *oombila*) is a grave and would normally be associated with burial in or on the ground. This region of Namibia, which is a ‘stoneless, flat land’ (Aarni 1982: 22), is devoid of caves. *Dhomomakololo* could be translated as ‘of the cavity-type’ (giving ‘cavity graves’), as the verb *okukulola* is to hollow out, *okukola* is to hollow out or juice *marula* fruits, and *omakololo* are cavities or hollows. However, when an understanding of the term *oombila dhomomakololo* was requested from an Ndonga friend, she returned the following

explanation: 'graves deep in the ground'.⁸ In this geographical and cultural context, to hollow out something for burial purposes is likely to connote underground graves, as opposed to caves. Secondly, the English text refers to the 'abyss' that the demons do not want to be sent into (8:31). The *Oshindonga* term *olumbogo lwomuule* could also link the spirits and the land. An *ombogo* is a small hole in the ground (made by digging insects), with the prefix *olu-* (noun class 6) indicating a long, thin, or diminutive version. *Lwomuule*, with its suffix *-le*, gives us the meaning 'deep'. The translation offered to me was 'deep hole'. Clearly, these terminological issues could have had a significant bearing on the interpretations offered.

When considering why Legion was in the tombs at all, all groups voiced the opinion that he would not be in the gravesite of his own volition, pressing the point that the man is not responsible for his own behaviour. Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo stated that people today fear gravesites, heightening the contrast with Legion's perception of this place and adding weight to the hypothesis that he is there 'because it is according to the will of the demon.' He explained that people fear the mortality they are confronted with, as cemeteries are places 'of deceased persons, not for the living.' He also noted (with laughter) that some people suggest that there are ghosts (*iiluli*: restless spirits of the recently deceased) in cemeteries.

What was a pointed out with humour in the above case was presented altogether seriously elsewhere. In fact, the existence of troubling *iiluli* arose so frequently in our group sessions that they became a considerable focus of interest in this study. Tatekulu Laban Iyambo described their connection with the graveyard:

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: | <i>iiluli</i> [pl.] sometimes like to wander near the graveyard or in the bush. |
| Author: | Why those two places? |
| Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: | That is the proper place for them to live. |
| Author: | Why? |
| Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: | <i>Omayendo</i> [graveyards] is where the bodies live. It is their home area. They just wander in the bush and come back to their home area of <i>omayendo</i> . |
| Author: | Their home area wouldn't be an <i>egumbo</i> ? |
| Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: | No, it's where the body is living. |

Ootate, CCBIG LUKE 24

⁸ Lucia Namushinga's translations in correspondence (02.11.2014).

Tatekulu Laban highlights for us the strong connection between the spirit of the dead and the corpse's physical location. That is, corpse, spirit and land are bound together. Whilst the ancestors might be 'placed' in the fields, Tatekulu Laban understands *iluli* to be 'placed' in the graveyard. It may be to the graveyard that they are banished through the provision of the ritual meal described above. Given these comments concerning domestic and cemetery burials, Legion's encounters with troublesome spirits in the gravesite find ready contextualisation.

The women's group stressed that Legion would not be in the burial site of his own will; thereby, they implied that to occupy such a site would be undesirable. An example will suffice:

Memekulu Rauha Andreas: The man in his mind is unable to recognise the good and the bad. He is just staying wherever he finds a place to stay.

The children, however, had a contrasting view. Both Klaudia Ashikuti and Loide Petrus referred to a burial site as 'a good place', with Loide also comparing it to a house: 'it is the house for the deceased person – a quiet house'. Others added that Legion was there because either he (Martha Nangolo) or the *oompwidhuli* (Eli Awala, Frieda Shilemba, Monica Emvula) sought his death and drove him to what was therefore an appropriate location. It is a location, too, where he is perceived to be out of help's reach, according to Okanona ANON6: 'there is nobody there to assist the man.' It is, at once, a restful place for the dead and a threatening place for the living.

Owambo ethnographies also introduce royal graves (*oompampa*) (Tönjes 1996 [1911]: 142–3), which were ritually potent sites connected to – or representative of – the 'power' of the ancestors (Aarni 1982: 64; see also Salokoski 2006: 25). Unlike other members of the Ndonga tribe (who were buried in a hole dug by the men with the body facing East: Aarni 1982: 42), the King's body was wrapped in a pure black ox hide and set upon the ground of his cattle kraal, supported in a sitting position. The black ox – a prized animal – was slaughtered when the king died (Hiltunen 1993: 77). Aarni explains that the body was then sheltered under a 'pyramid' of Mopane tree stakes.⁹ Alternatively, this could have been a stake enclosure, several rings deep (Hiltunen 1993: 78). The *ompampa* (s.) also acted as a sanctuary to subjects and even criminals or foreigners fleeing attack (see also McKittrick 2002: 35). Although he generalises

9 In some areas of Owamboland, in a historical context, it was *only* the King's body that was buried below ground (Aarni 1982: 42).

about 'Ovambo' religion and worldviews, Aarni may be correct when he states that 'the *ompampa* became the meeting place for the living and the dead' (1982: 82). The living may interact with the dead king through requests for rain-making and offerings of food, at least some of which may be for (ancestral) spirits present in the gravesite (Hiltunen 1993: 78). Once again, spirit presences would seem to be intimately connected to the location of the body in or on the land. This is a link also made by McKittrick, who reports that guns became the tool used to drive away the spirit of the dead (and other spirits) from the gravesite (2002: 62). Whilst there was no discussion of royal graves our group sessions, the overarching notion of a potent landscape was apparent and has its roots in the cluster of ideas, of which the potent royal grave is one.

1.4 *Iihongo's Living Landscapes: Wilderness Sites*

Many times it had seized him, and even though he was kept a prisoner, his hands and feet tied with chains, he would break the chains and be driven by the demon out into the desert.

LUKE 8:29b, GNT

Setting out from the homestead, and having traversed burial sites, we now journey onward into wilderness sites, for several participants discussed pockets or groves in the bush that were inhabited by personal, potent agencies.

The bush, or *ombuga*¹⁰ (8:29), was a location that the participants were somewhat ambivalent about in our discussions. However, it was definitely not just 'space', 'out there'. It was recognised to be rich in resources (food for animals, firewood, house-building materials) but it also signaled threats to community members, echoing Munn's claim that 'a place responds to violations (to forbidden presences or incorrect comportments) by causing physical danger such as potential illness or death to the violator' (Munn 2003: 95). Such threats in Iihongo were deemed to come not only in the shape of wild animals (snakes) and dangerous people (thieves, murderers), but also from the wild land itself. This is perhaps because it was not cleaned, or tamed, by habitation and agriculture, or because it was a 'dark' place with its own character and spirit-presences. What – to the unreflective, Western eye – might look like (unoccupied) 'space' between (occupied) 'places' (with Tuan) was described

10 This term could be translated desert (Viljoen, Amakali & Namuandi 2012: 29), wilderness, or bush. The participants seemed to contrast it with the village location and my translator rendered it 'bush,' so I proceed with that term.

very much as its own place, reflecting the culturally-bound ‘sense of place’ (Cresswell 2015: 16).

For example, Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo described the *ombuga* into which Legion is drawn as a ‘dirty’ place and added that ‘the spirit itself is dirty’. Meme Diina Itila’s explanation of Legion’s occupation of this location was equally negative:

- Meme Diina Itula: The demon is the power of darkness, therefore they took the man to the bush.
- Author: What is the connection between the power of darkness and the bush?
- Meme Diina Itula: The demon takes you wherever they want. Open space is compared with light. The bush you compare with darkness.

All of the groups acknowledged the existence of spirit ‘groves’, which were seen as highly dangerous sites, wherein one might encounter mysterious feelings, dangerous animals, poisoned food, or disappearances, all caused by the agency of malevolent spirits. The bush is far from inert:

- Loide Petrus: There is an area of bush called Shambulumbu. When you go there, if you are two people, one of you will disappear.
- Elizabeth Imbondi: There is a certain area where the elders will tell you not to move around there because there is a mysterious spirit. This is Oshilulu. There are a lot of Marula trees and snakes. And it is a dangerous place.
- Christa Iyambo: There is an area called Okuti where a person will call you and give you food but it will be poisonous and you will die.
- Memekulu Hilma Lugambo: There is a certain place called Okadhulu. It is a dangerous place. If you go there you will see something like *oompwidhuli*. If you don’t see something you will feel it.

Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo: When I was young, at Onankandi village you could see the light of fire during the night [in the distance] but when you approached there is just warmth and you feel a mysterious feeling in your body. And if you look further, you see the fire is there [i.e. has moved further away].¹¹

Whereas the restless spirits and ancestral spirits of the homestead, agricultural land and graveyards were explained with reference to deceased members of the community, the origin of the wilderness agencies was unclear. However, contextualising the comments with the help of ethnographic literature, it seems that the depiction of the bush returned by the groups – it is ‘dark’, ‘dirty’, and ‘dangerous’ – is what one might expect. Of characterisation of space within an African, ‘traditionalist life-world’, Nürnberger suggests that:

As one approaches the core [of the homestead], the necessity of respect increases. This is where the most essential deposit of power is located. As one approaches the periphery the world becomes more dangerous. There are clear demarcations between inside and outside. They can take the form of walls or fences, or they can be invisible for a stranger, but they always have the force of ritual markings.

NÜRNBERGER 2007: 23

Moving outside of the homestead in an Owambo context was deemed to be particularly perilous, with Estermann reporting that Kwanyama spirits (*ounikifa*) – ‘the spirits of possessors of magic power’ – ‘are thought to take special pleasure in persecuting whoever happens to go away from the house at night’ (1976: 190).

Aarni’s ethnography on the Aandonga states that the bodies of those who perpetrated anti-social behaviours (murder, witchcraft) were denied burial (which would have been within the *egumbo*) and therefore entry into the

11 Tatekulu Theophelus’s description of this phenomenon has echoes of that of Davies (1994 3: 25), who explains that *ounikifa* spirits (*Oshikwanyama*) were believed to be half human-half canine, visible around twilight, live in the bush and build small fires. They were the spirits of magicians (*Oshikwanyama: ehmule*).

Kingdom of Death ‘under the ground’ (1982: 74). Instead, their corpses were cast out into wild space to be eaten by wild animals (1982: 66, 70); ‘unburied persons’, he notes, ‘were restless’ (1982: 72). The same is true of victims of starvation, whose corpses would have been viewed as sources of starvation-contagion (Hayes 1992.1: 205–6; see also Nürnberger 2007: 24). These may add to the ‘wandering’ spirit presences in the bush, as Aarni argues, or even concentrations of spirit activity at the site of corpse-disposal. These persons would, without proper burial, become ‘homeless spirit[s]’ (Nürnberger 2007: 25). It is possible, I suggest, that there is a connection between the (historical) casting out of the bodies of undesirables and the (contemporary) notion of spirit-inhabited groves in the landscape. However, this is not the only autochthonous practice that might have given rise to such beliefs, whether then or now.

McKittrick (citing Warneck 1910) reports that protection was required for journeys through bush land: “the wanderer in the wilderness expects his amulet to make him invisible before his enemies and protect him from spirits” (2002: 35–6). As she makes clear, there was a sense of ‘vengeful otherworldly forces’ at play in this context (2002: 36). The kings, sometimes through local priests, designated sanctuaries in the landscape and, thus, ‘imbued’ the landscape ‘with extraordinary power’ (2002: 35). McKittrick relates that the bad behaviour of kings on a site or the ritual designations mentioned above could lead to the creation of magical groves in the wilderness; these were pockets of spirit-presence and power, sometimes malevolent (as referred to in our CCBIG sessions) and sometimes ‘places of refuge’ (2002: 34–5). As some of the participants’ responses suggested, entering these areas can threaten one’s security, and even one’s life. Here, connections with autochthonous worldviews seems apparent: the landscape is still potent, still ‘alive’.

The phenomenon of spirit-groves or potent sites is not unique to this context – it is mentioned in scholarship on other African cosmologies (for example, Mbiti 1990: 51 and 1971: 92), as well as that on the Middle East (Abu-Rabia 2005: 247). In the Owambo context, sacred groves seem to be particularly prevalent in Kwanyama ethnographies (Estermann 1976: 189; Tönjes 1996: 184). Estermann also describes the ritual of ‘putting the forest to sleep’ (1976: 149). Adding yet another dimension to the ‘very densely populated’ spiritual-physical landscape (Mbiti 1990: 74), Hiltunen describes the initiation of novice diviners, using termite mounds. A termite stack is, she suggests, ‘regarded as a residence of spirits’ and ‘that the old diviner here talks to the termite stack, shows that he believes a spirit to reside in it’ (1993: 42–3); a further example, then, of a historical *living landscape*, of which we might discern traces today in the CCBIG discussions.

1.5 *A Summary of the 'Living Landscape'*

Meredith McKittrick describes the fenced homesteads in Owamboland as 'the most visible symbols' of a concern with security, with protection against the invasion of 'visible and invisible forces' (2002: 3). The occupants might attempt to keep out these forces by ritually 'closing' the homestead, or areas therein (Hiltunen 1986: 69), and by avoiding making breaks in the fence line (Estermann 1976: 86). Not only would external forces be a threat to the homestead and its occupants (whether cattle-raiders, thieves, wild animals, or witches) but there is, as we saw above, the threat from restless spirits who previously lived within the homestead community. Nowadays, the deceased are buried in graveyards (*omayendo*) but, prior to Christianisation in the region, ordinary citizens were buried within the homestead or on its perimeter (Aarni 1982: 42; Tönjes 1996: 142). If the burial instructions of the deceased were not followed, they could return as an *oshiluli*, a situation referred to both in ethnographies (Aarni 1982: 72; Estermann 1976: 190) and our CCBIG sessions.

There is a clear connection thus far, then, between the location of the corpse and the resulting spirit presence, with both participants and ethnographies confirming that the place of burial, as well as its proper execution, roots the spiritual presence. And, to be rooted in death is desirable: 'to be a homeless spirit because of neglected funeral rites' would be disastrous (Nürnberger 2007: 25). Royal graves (*oompampa*) illustrate the association between corpse and spiritual presence/potency further. The corpse of the Ondonga king would be wrapped in a pure black ox hide and set in a sitting position on the ground of his cattle kraal. It would then be enclosed by a pyramid or rings of wooden stakes, becoming a ritually potent site with its own attendant spirits (Aarni 1982: 42, 64, 82). It might act as a site for offerings, pleas for rain, engagement with the ancestors, or even as a place of sanctuary for those seeking shelter from persecution (Hiltunen 1993: 78; McKittrick 2002: 35).

Ethnographies report that the bodies of those who perpetrated anti-social behaviours (murder, witchcraft), as well as victims of starvation or bewitching, were denied burial and therefore entry into the Kingdom of Death. Instead, their corpses were cast out into wild space to be eaten by wild animals. I have suggested that the potent sites in the wilderness landscape that the CCBIGs discussed might trace their origins back to such corpse-disposals. In this context, the 'wandering' spirit presences in the bush (those spirits who have the graveyard as their 'home area') only add to the perception of the wilderness as a populated, and sometimes threatening, place. Indeed, the participants specifically characterised the wilderness as 'dark', 'dirty', and 'dangerous'. In that regard, it is the concentrations of spirit activity at the site of burials and

corpse-disposals, whether in wild or domestic settings, that lead me to interpret the contributions as pointing to a *living landscape*.

However, it is not only negative spirit presences that inhabit the land. Positive spirits are associated with the east (notably, the direction of the main entrance of all Ndonga homesteads), whilst bad spirits align with the west (Hiltunen 1993: 36). The ancestral spirits, too, were viewed very positively and their burial grounds were to be shown great respect. It was hoped that they would maintain their restful state, and act as ‘helpers, protectors and guides’ (Aarni 1982: 62). Of course, the ancestors of other groups were, by definition, ‘other’ and potentially threatening. There were also particular sites in the landscape – the king’s grave, and those sites imbued with power by ritual specialists – that had positive potency as sacred groves or refuges (Aarni 1982: 82; Estermann 1976: 189; McKittrick 2002: 34–5; Tönjes 1996: 184). That termite mounds were spirits residences (Hiltunen 1993: 42–3), and that it was necessary to ‘put the forest to sleep’ (Estermann 1976: 149) only enhance the sense that the land, whether in the perceptions of the CCBIG participants or in the ethnographic record, may be seen to be ‘alive’ and as having agency. This supports Mbiti’s claim:

The invisible world presses hard on the visible: one speaks of the other, and African peoples “see” that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world.

MBITI 1990: 56

2 Possession in (Ethnographic) Context: Noctambulant Legion in a ‘Living Landscape’

It follows that Legion’s possession (flight from home, occupation of tombs, and wanderings in the wilderness), at least for the Iihongo interpreters, cannot reasonably be interpreted without a focus on the land itself, so bound up are ideas of landscape with spirit presences.

Lawrence’s citation of Hannah Lewis’s *Deaf Liberation Theology* (2007) is helpful in seeking to appreciate how texts are sometimes appropriated cross-culturally. Lawrence (2013: 28) asks us to consider that ‘oral and performative cultures also often appropriate a text to a cultural context shared by others: “Sometimes the story is framed in a new context, or the ending changed, or variants suggested alongside the original story” (Lewis 2007: 120).’

One example from Iihongo of the *living landscape* acting as an interpretative lens for Legion’s experience was particularly interesting. In particular, the

participant focused on Legion's relocation from house to gravesite (Luke 8:27), understanding it to have happened at night. The following 'reframing' was offered by Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo, who reported local instances of nocturnal relocation of community members to graveyards (*omayendo*):

Tatekulu Theophelus Iyambo: The evil spirit is the one who is controlling the man and taking him wherever it wants him to be. So, the man has no fear of being in the burial cave because it is according to the will of the demon. We are nearby the graveyard. For example, [imagine] my house is nearby the graveyard and I am the pastor in the congregation. I go to sleep in my house but when I wake up, I am not in my house but in the graveyard. But why do we have to wonder why [Legion] stays in the graveyard if this happens also in our community? Sometimes a pastor transfers to another congregation and the reason for that is that they sleep in the graveyard. The graveyard is a place of deceased persons, not for the living. Therefore, living people fear to go there because the people there are dead. You are with the dead.

The man went there in the wilderness according to the will of the demon, not his own will. The demon chose the wilderness because it wanted to take the man to a dirty place, because the demon itself is also dirty.

Tatekulu Theophelus is not the pastor but was reporting events that he had heard of in the locality. The extent to which he saw parallels between occupation of a gravesite in the text and his own community was striking. He appeared comfortably to equate Legion's habitation of the tombs 'according to the will of the demon' with the nocturnal movement to a gravesite in Ndonga communities. Seen in the context of an inhabited landscape, alive with the spirits generated through burial procedures or corpse disposal, one can better

appreciate this retelling or reframing interpretation of the narrative. A nocturnal relocation to a graveyard brings together ideas of the heightened level of spirit activity in both *wild land* and *gravesites* (and depictions of those as ‘dark’ and ‘dirty’ sites), as well as the potential for communication between spirits of the living and dead at *nighttime* and in *dreams* (the latter being more closely associated with reality than in a contemporary Western milieu [Aarni 1982: 69, 74]). Nighttime is considered to be very dangerous, especially given the heightened activity of spirits at night; ‘sunset, west, and night are bad and impure’, suggests Hiltunen (1986: 59). Furthermore, night is when the hazards that are more easily perceived during daylight hours (dangerous people and animals, potentially harmful terrain) become largely invisible. In addition, it is notable that the *resolution* to the problem of sleeping in the graveyard (a place-based spirit encounter) is itself spatially orientated; in order to overcome this undesirable, spirit-driven nightwalking, the pastor must *relocate* and take on another parish.

If the spirits do indeed originate in the gravesite (as suggested by Ananias Imbondi), perhaps this explains the ‘seizing’ (v.29 [*Oshindonga: kwata*]) that takes place (seemingly from a household location), with the spirits then taking him back to their place of origin, *kombuga* (to the bush/wilderness. GNT English: ‘desert’). Should one assume that this refers to the wilderness location of the burial tombs? Perhaps, although the CCBIG sessions suggested Legion’s interaction with the spirit world might not just be limited to his connection with the graveyard (8:27). He might also encounter spirits in the (wider) wilderness (8:29, perhaps), were he to enter a spirit grove, for example. It is possible, then, that Legion may be understood as being drawn *from* the graveyard out into the bush (going a stage further than Tatekulu Theophelus does, above), where he might encounter wandering spirits or happen upon sites of spiritual potency. Further tapping into the interpretations of the children, perhaps Legion’s experience is explained by an encounter with spirits sent by a malicious agent: either a contemporary who wishes him harm or, conceivably, a witch who is operating from beyond the grave.

The CCBIG responses agree with Mbiti’s point that ‘the living-dead may be considered to dwell in the area of the graves, some of which are in the former houses of the departed’ (1990: 83). As we move away from the fenced domestic space of the homestead, and even more so as we move beyond the homestead’s cultivated space, the landscape would appear to become more and more threatening, with associated spirits being more dangerous. Wild spirits or spirits of ‘undesirables’ – witches, murderers and the like – whose corpses were (historically) cast out on wild land, may have made for potent sites in the bush, alongside to sacred groves established by kings’ ritualists.

The CCBIG groups characterised this peripheral landscape as ‘dark’, ‘dirty’ and ‘dangerous’, all qualities they associated with wild and restless spirits. For the Iihongo interpreters, Legion is not just wandering through an inert landscape, as I might envision. He is wandering through heavily populated terrain and negotiating a characterful but potentially menacing landscape, having abandoned or been driven from the relative safety of domestic space. Legion has been moved by the spirits to their ‘home area’ – here, a collective burial site – and is encouraged by them to wander in the bush, where still further (and more dangerous) presences might be encountered.

The key to spirit presences at particular sites in the landscape would appear to be the interment or disposal of corpses and, in this regard, the autochthonous and contemporary conceptions coalesce. Is this because in ‘the African approach’, ‘the human being does not **have** a body, but *is* a body’ (Nürnberger 2007: 27, *emphases original*)? It would be impossible to verify such a generalised statement, but it points to the issue of worldview that permeates this study. Hiltunen suggests that ‘with a few exceptions old African religion does not know demons. Thus they are also lacking in Ovambo witchcraft’ (1993: 34). And yet, there is no shortage of malevolent spirit presences to provide the Iihongo participants with a fertile context for interpretation of Legion narrative. Spirits, witches and a *living landscape* – all key features of the worldviews documented by the missionaries and subsequent ethnographers – are seen here to persist in contemporary worldviews in Iihongo.

To abandon home, as Legion does, would appear to be undesirable, and even reckless. The explanation offered across the groups makes sense of his behaviour: Legion cannot have been acting on his own initiative. He is a ‘slave to the demon’ (Tatekulu Theophelus Iiyambo) who drew him to the gravesite, a place where he is out of reach. As a man, a member of the living community, he is indeed out of place in that burial site and wandering in the wilderness. However, as a *demoniac* (and that is how he is introduced in the text [Luke 8:27; Mark 5:2]), he is very much *in place* and *at home* in such landscapes. As he moves through the gravesites and the wilderness, he traverses the *living landscape* of the dead community.

3 Luke 8:26–39 in Eurocentric New Testament Scholarship: Spirits and the Colonisers

Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him.

LUKE 8:30, NRSV

Just as the Iihongo interpreters present us with a contextually-resonant, characterful landscape, so Eurocentric interpretations (here, professional ones) display their own contextuality. This is made all the more apparent when trends within the two bodies of interpretation are juxtaposed. That Judith Lieu references ‘supernatural forces and almost magical elements’ in the narrative (1997: 66) is rather suggestive of the distance of the Western scholar from the terrain of the story. She is quite clear in her description of them as ‘the forces of chaos’ (1997: 64), which she links with ‘the violence of the sea’ (65), having grouped the Legion narrative with the Calming of the Storm in Luke 8:22–25 (Evans also highlights the juxtaposition of the two passages [1990: 383]). Marshall finds the demonology in the story particularly problematic, stating that it ‘is so similar to that attested in popular superstitions of the time that it is difficult to believe that it corresponds to objective fact.’ This is indicative of a trend in unreflexive Western scholarship to question what the demons represent, rather than viewing them as potential realities in the hearers’ worldviews. This moves Marshall to attribute a psychological motive to Jesus’ allowing the swine to be destroyed ‘in order to convince [the former demoniac] that he was really free from the demons’ (1978: 336).

One solution for Western scholars – seemingly struggling to resolve a tension between ‘problematic’ or ‘magical’ elements of the narrative and a purportedly ‘objective’ and ‘rational’ contemporary Western worldview – has been to figure the demons as responses to Roman occupation:

Demon possession, for example, of the manically violent man among the Gerasenes, can be understood as a combination of the effect of Roman imperial violence, a displaced protest against it, and a self-protection against a suicidal counterattack against the Romans. ... The demoniac became the repository of the community’s resentment of the violent effects of Roman domination.

HORSLEY 2001: 145

Postcolonial interpretations of the Legion narrative, expounded by scholars such as Myers (1988) and Horsley (2001), view the spirits and demons (and their exorcisms) as symbolic. Myers locates the narrative firmly within the context of ‘reconstruction’ (1988: 186; cf. Horsley, below, on the renewal of Israel motif). He suggests that the exorcism is a ‘*public* symbolic action’ that points to ridding society of its possession, its ‘collective anxiety’ (1988: 193, emphasis original; contra Hollenbach [1981], who argues that colonial oppression leads to private neurosis in the demoniac). This ‘symbolic’ exorcism challenges the

collective mindset of subjugation by a foreign power. Myers summarises his argument in the following way:

This exorcism is thus another key episode in the Jesus-the-stronger-one's struggle to "bind the strong man." In the synagogue he was identified with the scribal class, now with Caesar's armies.

MYERS 1988: 194

Myers states that 'nowhere else in [Mark's] Gospel does Jesus converse directly with a demonic opponent except in the two "inaugural exorcisms" of 1:21ff. and 5:1ff.' (1988: 192). Admittedly, the storm in Mark 4:35–41 does not actually address Jesus, as do the unclean spirits in the 'inaugural exorcisms'. However, noting that alternative worldviews understand storms to be unclean spirits or demonic forces (see Chapter 6), the linguistic parallels between the exorcisms and the Calming of the Storm jump to the fore. In both 1:25 and 4:39, Jesus rebukes (*epitiman*) his opponent, telling both the unclean spirit and the storm to be silent (*phimoō*). In all other appearances in the New Testament, *phimoō* is only used in reference to interpersonal interactions (with humans or demons), therefore suggesting a sense of agency behind the storm in 4:35–41. This is compounded by the fact that, as Myers himself notes, the elements obey (4:41; 1988: 196). A further parallel is apparent in the astonishment/fear of the audiences (1:27–8; 4:40–1; 5:15, 17, 20). Similarities between the Calming of the Storm and exorcisms, once recognised, expand the category of Jesus' opponents beyond the political. Jesus also challenges natural phenomena in a passage that has no political allusions other than to reference 'the other side' (4:35). Meagre substantive evidence notwithstanding, Myers concludes that 'these harrowing sea stories intend to dramatize the difficulties facing the kingdom community as it tries to overcome the institutionalized social divisions between Jew and gentile'. Again, he reduces the narratives (despite clear reference to 'Semitic mythic personification of cosmic forces'), just as he did with Legion, to the level of (potentially, 'annoyingly allegorical') 'metaphorical action' (1988: 197).

Whilst this consideration of the Calming of the Storm has necessitated a brief diversion from Legion, it serves to illustrate the limitations of this political reading. Myers's assessment of exorcism as symbolic political action seems stretched when forced to apply to the Calming of the Storm, which has exorcistic undertones. Not only does that narrative have little in the way of political allusion but it may also offer a window onto a worldview in which natural phenomena are perceived as having genuine spirit agency. If that perception is indeed behind the Gospel of Mark (notable for its "magical" tendency', according to LeMarquand 2004: 55), then a simpler explanation of the Legion

narrative (as well as the synagogue exorcism and the Calming of the Storm) is that possession was understood (first and foremost) as possession, and exorcisms (first and foremost) as exorcisms. It is possible, I suggest, that Myers has over-engineered his treatment of Legion (and other spirit-related narratives). Whilst he has expressly sought to focus on the context and avoid the privileging of theological truths (1988: 9), it may be that Myers has inadvertently overlooked the contextual reality of spirit-engagements in his pursuit of political symbolism.

Drawing on Frantz Fanon, Horsley similarly interprets the demons as manifestations of colonial anxiety; they are 'superhuman evil forces' to be blamed for misfortune, so that the people might avoid blaming God for sufferings and avoid focusing on 'the "real" political-economic forces affecting them' (2001: 145). Whilst the argument for terminological associations with and allusions to the Roman army is persuasive, to limit interpretation of the narrative to the symbolic-political (and implicitly present spirits and demons as the polarised 'unreal' element) seems to me a reductionist approach. Horsley acknowledges the 'concrete experiences' of possession in the Gospels (2001: 146), and yet explains possession as a symptom of colonial oppression. It remains unclear why possessions, such as that of Legion, cannot be interpreted (at least initially) as lived realities explicable within alternative worldviews and without suggesting that Jesus has unique insight into the 'real' meaning of possession and exorcism. The communities in which Jesus operated were in some way primitive or ignorant, Horsley seems to suggest, for it is only through the exorcism of Legion that the 'demystification of (the belief in) demons and demon possession' takes place (2001: 147).

The Gospels recount multiple incidences of Jesus rebuking/subduing (*epitimān*) unclean spirits and casting out (*ekballein*) demons. These relate to illness, possession, and forces of nature. Seemingly, they are suggestive of worldviews that incorporate spirit agencies and hierarchies (cf. the Beelzebul controversy), not just symbolic forces. Horsley, by contrast, argues that the driving out and destruction of the demons (the Roman army) should be understood only in the context of the renewal of Israel, with political oppression being sufficient explanation of spirit 'activity': thereby, Horsley minimises the reality and agency of spirits.

If Horsley's assessment is pursued to its conclusion, it is the very lens through which the audience understands the event that is to be shattered by that event: the symbolic possession illustrates that possession is not 'real' – it is the political situation that is 'real'. However, not all gospel exorcisms have the political or military allusions that have been identified in the Legion narrative. In Iihongo, too, lived experience took precedence over the postcolonial context

as an interpretive lens: spirit-experiences were explained as spirit-experiences, not performances of the anxieties of colonised individuals or communities. With that in mind, I would argue that underlying worldviews – those which support the lived reality of spirit experiences – ought not to be minimised in interpretations of exorcism narratives or masked by (overly) symbolic or political readings.

What is notable is that this socio-political reading distances the demons from the places in which they are found. That is, it disrupts what the Iihongo interpretations suggest is as an organic link between the evil spirits and sites within the landscape – the tombs and the wilderness. The possession of Legion was understood in Iihongo as literal occupation of land and person, not metaphorically in relation to a colonial or postcolonial setting, despite its history. It was possession that caused the social ills detailed by the Iihongo interpreters as associated with *oompwidhuli*. It was not, as commonly found in postcolonial interpretations, a socio-political situation being ‘acted out’ in possession. Indeed, in not one of the CCBIG sessions conducted did any participant refer to Owamboland or Namibia’s colonial/postcolonial setting (admittedly, the possible connotations of the name Legion are not apparent in the *Oshindonga* GNT translation, which renders it *Ngundu*: ‘mob’ or ‘group’). Rather, and as has been illustrated, encounters with (and possession by) spirits is feature of contemporary, lived experience in Iihongo. The participants saw no need to read as metaphorical Legion’s spirits/demons precisely because the spirits *literally* occupy the land.

This chimes with David Frankfurter’s claim (generalisation aside) that in the “lived religion” of the ancient Mediterranean world ... local cultures lived in familiarity with a great range of ancestral and landscape spirits’ (2010: 28). In Iihongo, they are understood not only to exist across (and permeate) the landscape, but also to be encountered and quite literally felt by the living community. As Mbiti says, ‘it is an empirical experience’ (1990: 57).

4 Luke 8:26–39 in Eurocentric New Testament Scholarship: Spirits, Space, and Place

Jesus and his disciples sailed on over to the territory of Gerasa, which is across the lake from Galilee.

LUKE 8:29, GNT

The depictions of the tombs and the wild land in the Iihongo interpretations of Luke 8:26–39 are markedly different to those found in the majority of

Western scholarship. Examining the narrative through the lens of Eurocentric, post-Enlightenment ‘rationalism’, there is a tendency to favour metaphorical interpretations of the demons/spirits in the narrative, rendering them secondary to the living human characters. This demythologised reading, highlighted when considered alongside the Iihongo interpretations, also marginalises the agency of the land. I have already noted that, to me, the landscape is something of an inert stage upon which Legion’s narrative plays out: what Halvor Moxnes has called the ‘obvious, visible’ landscape (2003: 128). However, my understanding of the narrative is nuanced when viewed through the eyes of those whose worldview includes ordinary lived experience of spirit encounters and for whom community and landscape – the social and natural worlds – are intimately connected. This supports Moxnes’s suggestion that exorcisms like that of Legion might be seen as functioning in a spatial context. If I have understood the Iihongo participants correctly in my presentation of the *living landscape*, it would appear, at least initially, to fit with what Moxnes refers to as ‘the deeper meaning of the land’, ‘governed’ as he says it is ‘by spiritual powers’ (2003: 128).

Moxnes argues for a consideration of possession ‘in place’. However, his argument is primarily vested in the spatial location as a domain of contested power, focusing on ‘space described as Kingdom’ (2003: 134). Place as context for possession and exorcism is then viewed as an imagined blanket laid over the ‘obvious, visible’ (2003: 128) terrain:

The realms of Satan and of God are, so to speak, laid on the world that Jesus and his hearers inhabit. They are figures of speech or “spaces of representation” that give to experiences of being possessed and to exorcisms a spatial dimension.

MOXNES 2003: 136

Power and leadership over the contested space (Kingdom of God versus Kingdom of Satan) are played out in possession and exorcism experiences, which exhibit this ‘deeper meaning of the land’, ‘governed’ ‘by spiritual powers’ (2003: 128). Whilst this acknowledges that the significance of the land goes beyond the visible, it would appear to preclude a physical connection between the spirits/demons, the land, and Legion as a possessed character. The spiritual realm in Iihongo is, after all, far from a ‘figure of speech’. It is a lived reality. Here, Moxnes’s treatment gives in to the tendency in Eurocentric scholarship to present as metaphorical biblical references to spirit forces.

Such scholarship often focuses on the fact that the narrative may take place in Gentile territory. According to a Western worldview, this would seem to

be adequate characterisation of the land for the purposes of interpreting its role in the story (Franklin 2007: 938; Evans 1990: 383; Lieu 1997: 66). François Bovon has even gone so far as to outline how the author would have understood the terrain: 'as a Greek, Luke would understand geographical space as a system of cities with the hinterland that belongs to them' (2002: 326). Such points, however, direct us toward the human occupation of the land, whilst sidelining the character of the land itself. In other words, they focus on what is *on* the land, not what is *in* or *of* the land. The idea of power is central to notions of place (Cresswell 2015: 19); however, when considered through a Eurocentric lens, this focuses exclusively on the living human community. The power of place in Ondonga territory may, in contrast, be defined by the spirit presences in the land itself – the power of the dead to define space as meaningful place.

The tombs are one of the clearly defined places of importance in this narrative, in that Legion is described as occupying them, perhaps being restrained in them (if not restrained in the house/city and absconding to them) and moving between tombs and wilderness. It is reported that the tombs function as an indicator of the unclean condition in which we find Legion, along with the presence of unclean animals and unclean spirits (Green 1997: 335, 337; Lieu 1997: 65). Robert C. Tannehill suggests that he is 'dehumanized, living like a beast', partly linked to his abode in the tombs, and that he is 'beyond human control' (1996: 146). The tombs, then, serve as a marker to the uncleanness of the man, as well as his social separation from his community.

The tombs are also defined by Western scholars as the natural abode of demons, or unclean spirits. Luke T. Johnson notes that the Lukan author (for stylistic reasons) has not placed quite as much emphasis on the tombs as did the author of Mark (1991: 137, 139), who repeated the term in three verses (5:2, 3, 5), explicitly juxtaposing the tombs with the unclean spirit in 5:2. Johnson does not, however, offer explanation for the extent of the emphasis placed by the Markan author. Lieu designates the tombs as 'traditionally ... the habitat of demonic spirits' and as Legion's 'home' but does not develop this point or offer an explanation as to precisely why this is the case (1997: 65). Likewise, for I. Howard Marshall, tombs would be 'an obvious place to expect to find demons' (1978: 337). For C.F. Evans, this is also true of the desert: 'the special abode of demons' (1990: 384).

The Iihongo interpretations now give us a platform from which it is possible to reposition the landscape in the narrative (bearing in mind that the dead were also considered unclean in Owambo thinking: Aarni 1982: 42). For example, if we consider the links between the interment of a corpse and the resulting spirit presence in the land in Iihongo worldviews, quite why the tombs might be marked out as an undesirable place to reside becomes quite clear.

Spirits of the dead are linked to the tombs by the land in which the bodies are buried. It is the land that holds the memory and houses the spirit of that individual. The gravesite Legion occupies might be thought of as teeming with spirit life. The fact that Legion is *not* in a house of the living or residing with his community tells only half the story: of equal (or even greater) significance is that he is *actively* in the 'home area' of those spirits, whether that is the peaceful place some of the children described, or the fearful place others felt it to be.

Having considered a variety of Western sources on the Legion narrative with respect to the tombs (8:27), we are left with some unanswered questions with regard to the wilderness (8:29). For example, should we regard these as one (interchangeably termed) location in the narrative (the burial site *in* the wilderness, as Newheart suggests of the tombs 'in' the mountains in the Markan narrative [2004: 43]), or could we interpret the burial site to be conceived of as a *separate* category, albeit within the wider scope of the wilderness? Little is made of the desert or wilderness in its own right in the scholarship on this narrative, whereas the Iihongo interpretations considered the bush as quite a separate entity with its own characteristics. It is not clear, either, whether the man is restrained from leaving his community to *go to* the tombs or from *leaving* the tombs themselves – a question which Newheart points us towards (2004: 94).

It seems that the Iihongo interpreters would agree with the Western claims that the wilderness would be the 'natural' abode of spirits and they offer reasons why – these are some of the locations in which bodies might be discarded and in which spirit presences are therefore generated. Further associations may be drawn when we consider 'sacred groves' established by ritual specialists on royal command, and the free movement of wild spirits (*oompwidhuli*), potentially originating in (or travelling through) the sky. Such a strong connection between spirit and wilderness is reinforced by the equation made between their characteristics: they share a dark, dirty and dangerous nature. Legion being driven into the wilderness might be seen either as him being driven (from a house) to the 'home area' of the spirits (the tombs) or from the tombs to the wilderness, as graveyard-based spirits are reported to do. Alternatively, he might encounter spirits in sacred groves in the wilderness as he negotiates a landscape peppered by such spirit presences (including at the sites of disposal of witches' corpses). Such interpretations resonate with Mary E. Mills's claim that the wilderness is 'the place in popular folklore of evil forces' (1990: 102).

Using the Iihongo interpretations as a lens, the tombs and wilderness would appear to be conceived of as two very distinct sites, being characterised very differently as areas in the landscape. The land on which the graves are housed (notably dug, not in caves) may be the 'home area' of the dead buried there

and bring with it associated spirit activity. The bush, on the other hand, is the wandering place of spirits, but also has within it spirit groves or heightened spirit activity. It has become clear that Moxnes does not always consider the lived experience of spirit-encounters, more often conceiving of spirits and exorcisms as being 'placed' in "spaces of representation" (drawing on Harvey), with the *realms* of the spirits, God and Satan being mere 'figures of speech' (2003: 136) overlaid onto the 'obvious' landscape. In the present case, it is possible that this has led to neglect of the landscape. Western scholarship tends to ignore what is *in* or *of* the land, focusing instead on what is *on* the land: the characters. I suggest here, however, that we might fruitfully consider the land itself as a character. For the participants in my study, at least, the land, with its various spirit presences, *acts on the people*, at least as significantly as the other way around.

In summary, engaging the Iihongo interpretations of the landscape has revealed the contextual ('rationalist') nature of many Western interpretations. It has become clear that a demythologised, scientific bent (rarely acknowledged) engenders two key trends: spirits are rendered 'symbolic' and landscapes are thereby de-characterised. The landscape in such Eurocentric interpretation is usually discounted as an agent in the narrative and often figured simply as the stage for human action. This contrasts with the spirit-imbued landscape as understood in Iihongo. The Iihongo interpretations of the spirits afflicting Legion (and dictating his comportment) present an alternative to unreflexive Western scholarship's view of demons as symbolic, and possession as a performance of the colonised's anxiety. They unsettle the depiction of Legion's demons as a metaphor for Roman occupation and oppression. Anna Runesson's (2011: 95) observation then becomes all the more pertinent: the presence of the Roman military in this region was 'a post-70 phenomenon', applying to the Gospel writers' contexts but not to the narrative setting given, which is, of course, Jesus' lifetime.

In Iihongo terms, affliction by spirits is a reality, rather than a phenomenon connected to colonialism. However, there were also areas of correspondence with professional biblical scholarship: *oompwidhuli* might afflict the person and manifest in *onkwenya* (madness) – this connection between spirit possession and socially unacceptable behaviour was found in both postcolonial scholarship and in the Iihongo interpretations. And yet, the causal chain was reversed: in postcolonial interpretations, possession is a symptom of social ills: an 'acting out' of the colonised's anxieties. In Iihongo, by contrast, social ills result from possession, for spirit affliction is a genuine experience.

5 Conclusions

The spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them.

MBITI 1990: 74

The Iihongo interpretations of this passage offer a vision of Legion's landscape as populated by those beyond the living human community. Our discussions revealed understandings of an Ndonga landscape alive with links to the departed, inhabited by the spirits and ancestors that featured so significantly in pre-Christian worldviews in this region. The participants brought forth these 'traditional' perspectives in their interpretations of their surroundings, as well as Legion's landscape. Both positive and negative forces emanate from the Iihongo landscape – particularly from sites of corpse-burial – and impact upon members of the community, factors that meant the Lukan text resonated forcefully with the discussion groups.

The reflexive nature of this study has precipitated a realisation that my own perception of a landscape (arising from a Western and Eurocentric, demythologised, scientific worldview) was that of an inert stage, barring flora and fauna – one 'suitable' for an anthropocentric narrative. The Ndonga landscape, by contrast, was a *living landscape*. It was a character in something of a terracentric narrative. What might look to me like 'undifferentiated space' was, in fact, meaningful place (Tuan 1977: 6, in Cresswell 2015: 15), albeit occupied and characterised by deceased rather than living members of the community. In short, and borrowing a phrase from Nancy D. Munn, 'the potency of the landscape' (2003: 102) quickly became apparent. Tracing points of continuity with historical beliefs and practices demonstrated that contemporary perceptions of the living landscape, including the associated Owambo spirit network, owe much to autochthonous worldviews. In the case of Legion, these autochthonous worldviews – those indigenous to a locality – have engendered land-based, 'chthonic' interpretations.

The homestead was presented as a safe place, protected by a maze of passageways (and perhaps the use of apotropaic spells and amulets), and one which Legion would not have voluntarily left behind. Nonetheless, its symbolic boundary might still be penetrated by witches or spirits. This sense of 'safe' domestic space versus 'dark' and 'dangerous' wild space was prevalent in Iihongo: it arose in CCBIG sessions and is physically manifested in homestead construction, orientation and boundary-maintenance (illustrated, for example, by



FIGURE 7 Looking out of the western gate

concerns to keep closed the western gate; see Figure 7). Concern also endures regarding witchcraft: even amongst the children, there was familiarity with corpse-modification as a local practice to prevent the return of a witch. So, too, the belief that the restless dead might revisit the homestead: many participants reported visitations by, and procedures to say farewell to, spirits. In that context, Legion's experience of possession proved to be unremarkable.

Fundamental to my construction of the *living landscape* has been the four types of gravesite that have arisen in the CCBIG discussions and/or the ethnographic materials relevant to the Iihongo area: domestic graves, ancestral graves, royal graves, and corpse-disposal in the bush. Together, these gravesites lend the land its potency. Discussion of Christian cemeteries and ancestral burial sites furthered the sense that autochthonous beliefs about placed spirits persist. Nowadays, as most people are Christian and would therefore be buried in the cemetery (see Figure 8), the location of restless spirits was deemed by some to be the cemetery itself, the location and 'home' of the corpses. This may relate to the pre-Christian belief that the burial site is where the living-dead person was said to remain after burial and before proceeding to the Underworld (Aarni 1982: 74). The *aathithi* (ancestors), too, reside at their burial site and today, as historically, they should be addressed (and honoured with libations) when one wishes to traverse their land. This echoed the ethnographic reports of royal graves as sites of communication between living and dead members of the community (particularly the royal *aathithi*). Finally, numerous reports of spirit-inhabited pockets of the landscape are also suggestive of an enduring autochthonous perception of the landscape. Whilst mentioning neither kings making sacred such sites, nor the casting out of the corpses of undesirables, the participants' characterisations of potent sites seem directly related to the spirit groves or sanctuaries mentioned in ethnographies.

The Iihongo interpretation of Legion wandering through a living landscape foregrounded a perception of Legion *in community* with the dead, and therefore even further removed from the living community in the house and city. The agency of the demons in dictating the demoniac's location (gravesites, wilderness), compounded by the agency of Jesus in the healed man's location (in community with Jesus and the disciples, heading back to the city and the house) is key to understanding the role of place in the story, and vice versa. The figure himself, both when possessed and once healed, has little agency in the narrative vis-à-vis his place (geographically, metaphorically). Initially, it is the demons who choose where he goes and, latterly, it is Jesus who does so. As Green quite rightly points out, the character introduced in 8:27 and 29 is (passively) 'displaced', as a 'man' (1997: 341). The spirits/demons are in charge, dictating the man's comportment, clothing, place of wandering, and abode. Their

‘resistance’ and ‘defensive posture’ (Green 1997: 338) might be understood in the context of a challenge from Jesus on their home turf – in the wilderness and nearby gravesite.

And what of the land? Newheart says of the Markan passage: ‘this is unclean territory, perfect for an unclean spirit’ (2004: 45). However, the Iihongo interpretations suggest that a *wild landscape* is perfect for spirits, full stop. It has been interpreted in Iihongo as a landscape that includes *graves* and wild spaces or *groves*, both ‘home areas’ of spirits. I do not mean to suggest that the uncleanness is to be understated or is irrelevant. Rather, it is perhaps best considered a separate point. Understood through the lens of the Iihongo interpretations, the Markan phrase is not ‘rather vague’ (Marshall 1978: 339) but comprehensible. The demons wish, in Iihongo terms, to be let alone to reside in their ‘home area’, whether in the man or in the herd of swine and hence settle for this ‘concession’ (Evans 1990: 386). As Bas M.F. van Iersel suggests, ‘demons, just as deities, are bound to a particular place’ and hence they beg not to be ejected in the Markan narrative (1998: 199). They beg to stay ‘in place’.

This biblical spirit encounter can be interpreted in a framework of locations in which spirits would be expected to reside or wander – groves, the bush,



FIGURE 8 The cemetery

graveyards. Where Green says ‘having just seen Jesus display mastery over the monstrous forces of nature (8:22–25), we are equally convinced of Jesus’ power and ability to save’, we could also propose a two-fold demonstration of power on Jesus’ part over spiritual forces in a seascape (8:22–25) and spiritual forces associated with the landscape (8:26–39). That the ensuing passage (8:40–56) deals with Jesus’ power in a domestic setting might also contribute to the highlighting of place in these narratives of healing. To call these forces simply those ‘of nature’ (Green 1997: 338; Evans 1990: 383) is, perhaps, to underplay the role of the land in the narrative, particularly (for the participants in Iihongo) in generating evil spirits through burial (or disposal) of a corpse.

Similarly, identifying the spirits in Luke 8:26–39 as ‘symbolic’ or as necessarily the ‘acting out’ of the colonially oppressed serves to sanitise or flatten the landscape in the narrative. Such interpretations draw us away from spirits as part of the genuine, lived experience of communities in ancient and contemporary societies (amongst them believing communities in Western settings), and the possibility of the land as characterful, as an agent. The Iihongo interpretations did not align with symbolic or postcolonial interpretations emanating from the academy. Therefore, they brought to the fore the more straightforward interpretation of Legion being plagued by spirits, those that might form an integral part of his social and natural world. When brought into dialogue with professional scholarship, they challenged Moxnes’s interpretation of the spatial realms of spirits, Satan and God – connections between land and the supernatural – as mere ‘figures of speech’. Additionally, despite living in a postcolonial context, the interpreters in Iihongo did not link Legion’s experience with colonial oppression, as Horsley would suggest. In Iihongo, Legion’s spirit affliction was understood as just that: spirit affliction.

In Iihongo, as one moves further away from the domestic centre, the land is argued to become darker, dirtier, and more dangerous, with such spirit affliction seemingly becoming more likely. A domestic grave (whether in the home-*stead* or in the graveyard) is the home area of the deceased’s spirit. *Aathithi* fields are areas of continued spiritual power, not to be built upon. There are potent pockets in the bush in which spirit presences are concentrated and within which people are poisoned, killed, or see and feel strange things. Legion is traversing heavily populated terrain. That this is a land ‘imbued ... with extraordinary power’ (McKittrick 2002: 35) is true today, just as it was historically. In this context, Legion’s possession is inextricably linked to ‘possessed’ terrain because the spirits are *in* and *of* the land.

Commanding the Whirlwinds, Calming the Storm: Interactions with Nature ‘in Culture’ and ‘in Christianity’ (Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52)

The choice of the Calming of the Storm (4:35–41) and Walking on the Sea (6:45–52) narratives was based on the opportunity they presented to focus on the theme of *Landscapes*, here in the form of ‘weatherscapes’ and ‘waterscapes’. Given that the region’s pre-Christian worldviews are influenced by a mixture of animistic and dynamistic thought (Nürnberger 2007: 9), I wished to explore the ways in which autochthonous beliefs about the natural environment persisted. Because the disciples fear they see an *oshiluli* (restless spirit; GNT English: ‘ghost’) in 6:45–52, the sessions also afforded us time to reflect on the theme of *Spirits*.

Initially, I sought to understand how the participants perceived watery environments in their own contexts and in the narratives: were they safe, dangerous or neutral locations? We also discussed whether it was significant that both events occurred at night, whether there was an agent causing the storm, and by what means (and in what capacity) Jesus was able to subdue the storm and walk on the sea. I also took the opportunity to ask whether people in Iihongo (or in Ondonga, more generally) demonstrate control over aspects of nature in a similar manner to that of Jesus in either narrative. Specifically, I wanted to know if *oonganga* (diviner-healers) would be deemed to have (or have had) such powers, and whether the participants might draw comparisons between Jesus and *oonganga*.

In the discussion below, the engagement with Eurocentric historical-critical studies of these texts demonstrates the challenges these contextual interpretations bring to a field heavily influenced by Enlightenment Rationalism. As social-scientific approaches encourage in biblical scholarship greater sensitivity to cross-cultural particularities, a conversation is struck up with interpretations from that field, thereafter.

1 Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52 in Iihongo CCBIGS

A prominent feature of the contextual discussions was the spirit agency involved in the narratives. The understanding of unclean spirits as causative

forces behind weather phenomena influenced interpretations of both the wind and waves as aspects of stormy conditions. In addition, Jesus' interactions with the wind and waves in 4:35–41, as well as his walking across the water in 6:45–52, were interpreted through a spirit-tinted lens.

1.1 *Iihongo Perspectives on 'The Elements'*

It is worth noting from the outset that in the *Oshindonga* translations of both of the texts at hand the language used to describe the stormy conditions is wind-centred. The conditions described in 4:37, *oshikungulu oshidhigu shombepo*, could be literally translated as 'a storm heavy of wind' or, more smoothly, 'a strong wind storm'. In 6:48 the text refers to *ombepo yoshikungulu*, which is literally 'the wind of the storm', or the windstorm. *Ombepo* may be understood here as wind (in common usage one would refer to *ombepo ombwanawa*, 'a pleasant breeze') but it is elsewhere used to designate spirit, or air (ELCIN 1996: 270, 7). *Oombepo dha nyata*, for example, are unclean spirits (Luke 8:29a). The linguistic association between wind and spirits, then, should be clear from the outset.

As a result, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the participants expressed the conviction that windstorms *are* spirits. A clear example demonstrated the point: a whirlwind may be understood as an unclean spirit (*ombepo ya nyata*) or restless spirit (*oshiluli*). Notably, there was widespread understanding of methods by which one might control and redirect whirlwinds away from the homestead (*egumbo*), through formulaic verbal address:

Memekulu Julia Iiyambo: According to my experience, while I was young, I was told by my parents, if you see a whirlwind near the house you run out and clap your hands and call out 'we have *om-waali* [in the *egumbo*]'. And that whirlwind will make a turn and go away.

[*omwaali* is a woman who has very recently given birth]

Author: What is the connection between the whirlwind and the *omwaali*?

Memekulu Julia Iiyambo: The whirlwind is *ombepo ya nyata* [an unclean spirit]. The connection is that if that spirit destroyed that room [hut], the *om-waali* is not able to run away with that infant. Therefore, you say you have a special person in that house so the unclean spirit must not put harm on that house.

Loide Petrus:	One day we were at home. Suddenly we saw a whirlwind coming straight to our house. One of my parents said, 'please, we have <i>omwaali</i> here!' Suddenly the whirlwind turned away. [5 or 6 of the children have experienced this]
Ananias Imbondi:	One day we were in our house and the whirlwind came. One of our parents said, ' <i>oshiluli</i> [restless spirit] <i>pita po!</i> [<i>Oshiluli</i> , go away!]. Then the whirlwind went away.
Author:	So, is a whirlwind an <i>oshiluli</i> ?
Ananias Imbondi:	Yes, maybe. I just heard what my parents said to the whirlwind.

Only one participant voiced the opinion that the whirlwind having changed course, apparently as the result of the shouts about the *omwaali*, was merely a matter of chance (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo). The children expressed the majority view when they explained that people redirecting the whirlwind did so through 'the power of traditional culture' (Ndonga culture: *omuthigululwakalo gwaaNdonga*) or 'through their own power':

Frieda Shilemba:	Jesus calms the strong wind.
Author:	How do you think he does that, Frieda?
Frieda Shilemba:	Jesus commands the wind to stop.
Author:	Like people might command a whirlwind to go away?
Frieda Shilemba:	No.
Eliaser Uushona:	He commands this wind by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Author:	And in your context, what power are you using to order the whirlwind away?
Eliaser Uushona:	They command the whirlwind through the power of traditional culture.
Loide Elago:	They command it through their own power.
Freida Shilemba:	I agree with Eliaser [that the power of traditional culture is used to alter the course of a whirlwind].
Erastus Kuutondokwa:	I agree with Eliaser.

Author: Please would you put your hand up if you think that traditional culture [*omuthigululwakalo*] is still powerful?
[circa 18 agree]

This was not the only example of commanding nature through shouts, or of a distinction being made between the power of traditional culture (*omuthigululwakalo*) and Christianity (*uukristi*) (suggestive of parallelism rather than hybridity of worldviews, in this instance). Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo detailed an example of exorcising¹ a land-based spirit through traditional culture:

Translator: Have you heard about people commanding aspects of nature through shouts?
Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo: In our culture (*omuthigululwakalo gwaaNdonga*) or in Christianity (*uukristi*)?
Author: Either.
Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo: In the culture I recall the field where I am staying now [i.e. where his *egumbo* is located]. There was an evil spirit. And there is a person known as Kambonde Kalugodhi who stopped it. He was a headman and he was the previous owner of the field.
Author: How did he stop the evil spirit?
Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo: He stopped it by calling the name of *Kalunga kaNangombe* that please help me the power to stop this evil spirit and then the evil spirit stopped.
Translator: Before the missionaries came in Namibia, people believed in *Kalunga kaNangombe* [god of Nangombe].
Author: Who is Nangombe?
Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo: The Ndonga people they were from *evi lyomatale* [the place of lakes]. And Nangombe was the person who brought the people to the present area. Therefore, people started to honour him and it is the god who was leading him.

¹ This description fulfills the qualities of exorcism as put forward in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (cited by Witmer 2012: 26).

Other examples of verbal interactions with what a Western eye might designate as purely natural phenomena were commands to quell thunderstorms and verbal formulae to encourage rain:

- Loide Elago: There is another, for example thunderstorms. When there is lightning and thunder you have to use the words '*Nayi kwate, ihe inayi lya!*' [Let it rain with thunder and lightening, but without killing or destroying!].
- Martha Nangolo: When there is rain, the parents used to say '*vula loka*' [please rain/give us water] so that we do not go and steal.²

Lastly, Maria Johannes commented that you can calm a lightning storm by putting salt on the fire, suggesting that 'maybe there is a secret in the salt. Because when you put it in the fire you hear the sound of it burning (tock, tock, tock).' People regularly interact with natural phenomena, then, be they whirlwinds, thunderstorms, lightning, or rain. Those interactions were usually presented as verbal engagements but could also take the form of practical measures designed to protect or prevent. These local experiences allowed the participants, in the vast majority, to relate easily to Jesus' interactions with the stormy conditions in both texts. Both accounts included verbal address and a reaction from the natural element, suggesting there might be fruitful grounds for comparison: just because the Markan text is not explicit about connecting natural phenomena with spirits, the similarities seem undeniable. The contrast should be noted, however, between the sources of power drawn on by Jesus (the power of the Holy Spirit), on the one hand, and members of the local community (the power of traditional culture), on the other.

There were a variety of understandings as to why there was a storm at all in the narratives. Some of the participants suggested such events 'just happen' (twenty children rejected the idea that there was deliberate agency behind the storm), or that the storm was sent by the devil (Ester Nicodemus). Eliaser Uushona suggested that the high winds in 4:35–41 might be the result of human-spiritual agency: 'These people were in the lake. Maybe there was someone behind them who was a witch (*omulodhi*) and who was against

2 This particular request is echoed in a rainmaker's prayer to *Kalunga KaNangombe* that both an Owambo (from Uukwaludhi) and a missionary source (from Uukwambi) reported (Hiltunen 1993: 83). A Kwanyama song to the rain also includes such a plea (Estermann 1976: 171–2).

them. Maybe the *omulodhi* sent the storm to destroy them. And Jesus prevented it.' Several participants felt that the windstorm could be the work of *Kalunga* (God) or nature as controlled by *Kalunga* (Klaudia Ashikuti, Elizabeth Imbondi, Wilbartina Teofilus, Hileni Iiyambo, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo). In Iihongo, whirlwinds might be seen as a dry season punishment from *Kalunga* (Meme Maria Kashowa). The severe implications of unclean spirits rampaging across the land, whatever their origin, was noted: 'If it is rainy season the *mahangu* can be flattened and it is by unclean spirits [*oombepo dha nyata*]' (Memekulu Julia Iiyambo). Therefore, whilst stormy conditions are readily associated with unclean spirits (and/or spirits of the restless dead), the storm as a whole (and presumably the spirits therein) is not necessarily understood as sent by someone or something. Spirits, and their associated wind/rainstorms, can 'just happen'. Spirit dwellings and presences permeate the landscape (see Chapter 5) but also nature more generally, here illustrated by perceptions of weather phenomena.

That the storms in Mark both took place at night also made sense to the Iihongo interpreters: they experience the majority of storms in the later afternoon, evening, and through into the night (Memekulu Hileni Nendongo, Memekulu Hilya Johannes, Eliaser Uushona). In addition, they felt that Jesus would be busy in the day and therefore not available to demonstrate his commanding force over the spirits of the wind (Loide Elago, Ester Nicodemus, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo, Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo). Chapter 5 highlighted that spirit activity is deemed to be heightened at night. This contextualises the nocturnal storm in 4:35–41, if it is understood as spirit-driven. In addition, the clustering of potentially spirit-focused concepts in 6:45–52 becomes clear as we consider the Iihongo interpretations, with its mention of both wind and a ghost sighting in a nocturnal setting.

Thus far, the discussion has been focused on wind and has centred on the Calming of the Storm. Before moving on to examine Jesus Walking on the Sea (and to consider water more generally), I should summarise the points gleaned thus far. It was expressed explicitly by the entirety of the women's group that the winds Jesus faced in 4:35–41 were unclean spirits. The majority of the children's group made the connections between commanding a whirlwind in Iihongo and Jesus commanding a storm. However, they stressed the differing sources of power. With regard to the power of local culture, the examples given were mostly of interactions with nature through verbal command. A variety of agencies (and none) were identified as having sent the spirits/winds and waves, including *Kalunga*, Satan, and witches. Conflicting views in the men's group contributed the added dimension of verbal address to land-based spirits, as well as the view that diversion of whirlwinds was down to chance, not



FIGURE 9 A haul of *omafuma* (frogs)

'traditional culture' (*omuthigululwakalo*). The Iihongo interpretations (as well as the example of commanding the whirlwinds, land spirits, and other natural phenomena) encourage us to consider the possibility that it is a spirit (and not the wind itself) that Jesus 'scolded' or 'frightened away' in 4:39 (*ganda*: Tirronen 1986: 45).

And so, to the water, which is presented as a 'lake' (*etale*, pl. *oma*-) in 4:35, whereas the term 'sea' (*efuta*, pl. *oma*-) is used in 6:45. Bodies of water such as these were conceived of as dangerous places, given the risk of drowning (Memekulu Maria Nangolo, Hileni Iiyambo). However, lakes were noted to be vital water resources for humans and animals (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo, Hileni Iiyambo). Furthermore, local rainwater lakes (*oshana*, pl. *iishana*) provide much needed wild foods such as fish and frogs (see Figure 9). However, these seasonal pools form along wide (ordinarily dry) riverbeds and were conceived of differently than the lake/sea setting of the narratives. Tatekulu Laban Iyambo, for example, noted the lack of lakes in the Ondonga kingdom and the women explained that you would not put a boat on an *oshana*.

Following the interpretation of the wind as harbouring or being unclean spirits, rainstorms, too, were interpreted as wet season punishments from *Kalunga* (Memekulu Hileni Nendongo). Furthermore, the waves (*omakuthikuthi*) Jesus faces were also stated to be unclean spirits (Memekulu Julia Iiyambo). It follows that in 4:39, through verbal command, it is to a spirit (or several) that Jesus says '*mwena!*' (defined as 'stop talking, keep silent, do nothing' by Tirronen 1986: 240) and not to the waters themselves.

Jesus' ability to walk on the water found comparison in the local context with spirit beings traversing bodies of water. As *iiluli* are 'just wind' (Loide Petrus) or 'just spirit' they are 'weightless' and can walk on water (Hileni Iiyambo) but one would see no footprints (Memekulu Julia Iiyambo). That is, *iiluli* are said to walk over, not on surfaces (Loide Petrus). Likewise, Jesus: most felt he would walk *above* the surface of the water (consensus amongst the women's group, thirteen of sixteen in the children's group, contra Tatekulu Laban Iyambo and Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo, who felt he would walk *on* the surface of the water, although in spiritual form). Just as the restless spirit³ that the disciples

3 The *Oshindonga* text has *oshiluli* at 6:49, whereas the GNT English has 'ghost'. Conceptually, these are different. An *oshiluli* is the restless spirit of a dead person (perhaps similar to a ghost). However, it originates in the 'unsatisfactory' method of disposal of a corpse, perhaps because that person was a murderer, victim of starvation, or a witch, whose burial requests (to prevent them returning) had been ignored. '*Oshiluli*', as a concept, is heavily entrenched in the autochthonous culture of the region.

thought they saw⁴ would traverse the body of water in its non-material form, so Jesus would walk on (or above) the water ‘spiritually’ (Memekulu Hileni Nendongo, Memekulu Julia Iiyambo, Meme Monika Shipa, all of the children bar Albertina Nicodemus). However, whether one would expect to see (or experience in another way) an *oshiluli*, a restless spirit, walking on water at all was a point of contention:

Author:	Do <i>iiluli</i> walk on lakes?
Memekulu Julia Iiyambo:	Yes, sometimes in the water you hear the sound of footsteps on the water but you look back and cannot see anything on surface of the water. This is in the night. And you can even see the bush moving but there is nothing in the bush.
Author:	Would you expect to see an <i>oshiluli</i> on the surface of a lake? On water?
Tatekulu Laban Iyambo:	No, I am not anticipating to see <i>iiluli</i> walking on the water.
Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo:	Yes, according to the story from those who have seen it.
Author:	Do <i>iiluli</i> walk on lakes?
Loide Petrus:	Yes, because they are just wind [<i>ombepo</i>]. It is the dead person who has come back.
Hileni Iiyambo:	<i>Oshiluli</i> is weightless. It is just a spirit. It can walk on the water.

Associated with this idea of a *non-material* walking *above* the surface of the water was the idea that Jesus was able to change his state from physical to spiritual at will. It was suggested that ‘naturally [Jesus] is a spirit’ (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo) and he walks in the form of the Holy Spirit (*Ombepo Ondjapuki*) (Loide Petrus, contra Albertina Nicodemus), which served to explain his transition in 6:45–52. It was made clear, however, that this was Jesus in spiritual form, and not the restless spirit of Jesus or a dream of Jesus that the disciples

4 It should be noted that there is a level of ambiguity across the CCBIG transcripts as to whether one would be able to see an *oshiluli* at all. At points, certainly, that idea was categorically rejected. However, the women’s group suggested in this round that an *oshiluli* looks physical but is not (Memekulu Maria Kondo) and can only be seen at night (Memekulu Julia Iiyambo, perhaps referring to movement rather than materiality). Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo also suggested that you could see *iiluli*: ‘When you see *oshiluli* you can ask yourself: what is this? Is this a person or what?’.

were encountering. As with his interaction with the wind, Jesus' mastery over the water (or his ability to transition to spiritual form) was put down to the power of the Almighty (Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo).

1.2 *Iihongo Perspectives on the Figure of Jesus*

The CCBIG sessions undertaken on Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52 present Jesus as, in many ways, a unique figure in Iihongo conceptions but in some ways as sharing qualities that the participants associated with spiritual beings in their contemporary experiences. In his abilities to interact with nature, Jesus appears to share in the ability of some or all of Iihongo's residents to engage with the agency of malevolent spiritual forces in weather phenomena. In those regards, we see the interpenetration of worldviews (autochthonous and Christian) and the joint influence of both on the participants' interpretations. Overall, it was the reality of the spiritual realm and the influence of spiritual beings on the material lives of the community that seemed to influence most the interpretation of these two narratives.

Jesus was presented as uniquely 'other' in his interactions with the winds and the waters. Iihongo residents might challenge the unclean spirits of a whirlwind 'through culture', and Jesus was seen to share in this process – both in the challenge (verbal address) and having an adversary (spirits). However, the power engaged (securing the successful result) was seen to be different: Jesus accessed divine power. He may be understood to walk on water in the form of and through the power of the Holy Spirit, achieving the same end as the culturally-bound *oshiluli*, but through different means. 'Naturally', it was suggested, Jesus is a spiritual figure with the unique ability to metamorphose between physical and spiritual states (for example, Frieda Shilemba, Hileni Iiyambo, Maria Johannes). Whilst there was some reticence to discuss the extent to which diviner-healers (*oonganga*) interacted with nature, the responses that were forthcoming from the children suggested that neither *oonganga* nor *aalodhi* (witches) had power over nature. Where *oonganga* did claim power over disease, their claims were deemed to be disingenuous and their treatments ineffective (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo), perhaps suggesting that the influence of autochthonous healing methods is on the decline. Jesus was not in any way conceived of like an Ndongo ritualist.

In summary, then, Jesus may be seen as a 'sacred other' in the Iihongo context in that he commands the unclean spirits 'with the Almighty power' (Memekulu Hileni Nendongo), with 'the power of the Heavenly Father' (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo), through Holy Spirit (Maria Johannes), and as Son of God (Ester Nicodemus, Loide Petrus). There was, however, a great deal of resonance between the commanding of whirlwinds (and other spirits-in-nature)

in Iihongo and Jesus' mastery of the spirit presences in the weather phenomena in the narratives. In addition, the figure of Jesus was appropriated for the Iihongo context and understood through a spirit-tinted lens; his walking on water, in particular, was understood in terms of the qualities he might share with an *oshiluli*, a restless spirit, rendering Jesus at once not-so-unique.

Perhaps informed by the nighttime setting of the text, autochthonous understandings of a 'flimsy' division between material and spiritual realms, and ambivalence of such terms as *ombepo* and *oshiluli*, the spirits were highly influential when interpreting Jesus as a figure in these narratives. When operating in a spiritual form, the interpreters felt he would take on the qualities of an *oshiluli* (restless spirit). However, that he was operating in spiritual form at all was actually *dictated* by what an *oshiluli* (versus a human) could achieve in the first place. He was walking above the water *because* that is what *iiluli* do, as evidenced by the lack of footprints on the water's surface. As, Loide Petrus said: 'he is a spirit so he cannot touch it. It is like an *oshiluli*.' The restless spirit, then, provided the lens through which the activity of Jesus was understood. The goal, however, was deemed by Tatekulu Laban Iyambo to be to test the disciples and to illustrate that he was precisely *not* an *oshiluli* but was a unique being of the Almighty.

2 Ethnographic Contextualisation

The fact that spirits are part of the lived experience of the participants seems to have engendered clear appreciation of Jesus challenging spiritual forces manifesting in weather systems (or simply natural phenomena, depending on your worldview). Spirits were central to their understanding of the narratives and they easily related them to aspects of their own experience in the community. The idea that spirits would *only* be engaged in dream and trance states was roundly rejected in other sessions (Wilbartina Teofilus, Maria Johannes, Memekulu Victoria Mvula, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: CCBIG Luke 24). That said, Jesus' interactions with the wind and the water were seen to be very different from interactions with spirits in Iihongo, largely based on the idea that Jesus derived his power to engage the spirits from God, whereas a resident of Iihongo might engage a spirit through the power of traditional culture (*omuthiguluwakalo*). To that extent, Jesus was identified as a 'sacred other'. Nevertheless, the influence of local experiences on the participants' understandings of the texts is clear.

Moving forward to engage historical-critical and social-scientific scholarship in conversation, the following prominent themes will be significant:

- i. Ready association of natural phenomena with unclean spirits (*oombepo dha nyata*) and restless spirits (*iluli*).
- ii. Tradition of addressing spirits in the landscape and nature through formulaic, personal, verbal command.
- iii. Jesus' calming of the storm was 'othered' in the sense that his power to engage the spirits in the wind and waves derived from the Almighty – he is presented as a sacred other.
- iv. Jesus' actions (walking above the water) and very person (traversing the water in spiritual form) were interpreted through a spirit-tinted lens.

These are themes that can be contextualised within ethnographic materials on the Ndonga (and wider Owambo) populations. There are abundant examples to illustrate the autochthonous origin of beliefs in spirit agency behind natural phenomena relating to (amongst other things) rain, flora, landscape, and minerals. Hiltunen, drawing on early missionary sources, explains that a rainmaker (*onganga yomvula*) was expected to 'take the rain spirit captive' in a palm basket covered with hide, transporting it from its residence 'in a doorless and roofed hut' in one of the Northern Kingdoms, back to Ondonga (1993: 79). Hiltunen associates this rain spirit with the ancestral spirits (*aathithi*), particularly around the graves (*oompampa*) of deceased kings (1993: 81; cf. McKittrick 2002: 34–5). This is unsurprising given her earlier comment: '[the spirits] are thought to stay in the vicinity of their homes, in fields, woods, trees, termite stacks, mole-holes, but in particular around graves and holy things (*iimenka, iinenge*)' (1993: 35). McKittrick notes that – the Aawambo having acquired arms from the colonists and missionaries – shots were fired at burials to drive away the spirits of the deceased from the gravesite (2002: 62). Upsetting these ancestral spirits – the mediators of the rain, which is ultimately 'of God' (Hiltunen 1993: 83) – might lead them to prevent the onset of the wet season (1993: 74). Whilst Hiltunen also points to the existence of 'natural spirits' (1993: 36), her treatment of these is not expansive. Further, she notes separately the existence of 'spirits of the salt valley', who also required offerings as part of the salt gathering expeditions, 'so that they would not come with the salt [from the Etosha Pan] to the kingdom and produce destruction' (1993: 91). Overall, Hiltunen's treatment draws most interactions with spirits back to ancestral spirits (*aathithi*), whilst the Iihongo participants contrasted these quite starkly with other spirits (for example, *iluli* and *oombepo dha nyata*). She suggests that the *aathithi* 'are on the move especially at sunset and in the dead of the night' (1993: 36; cf. Malan 1995: 28), which resonates with the Iihongo interpretations.

In terms of the verbal address of spirits, I am unaware of ethnographic literature on Owamboland that mentions addressing winds, waves, or storms.

The overall power of words in African spirituality is noted by Nürnberger ('words ... carry dynamistic power' [2007: 31]), who suggests that whirlwinds may be one of the ways in which ancestors may be understood to communicate with the living (2007: 38). Hiltunen discusses informal prayers accompanying offerings to both the benevolent spirits of the east and the capricious spirits of the west (see also Malan 1995: 28) and notes that 'some magic rites also include an address, which is more a spell than a prayer' (1993: 36). Verbal address was made by salt-collectors to the spirit 'Grandmother' (dwelling in a small hill beside the saltpan) to ensure trouble-free salt-collecting expeditions (1993: 97), as well as by a diviner greeting the resident spirit of a termite stack (1993: 42–3). Other examples of talking to the spirits whilst making offerings are connected to bringing rain (McKittrick 2002: 30–2), first harvest (1993: 107) and purifying the homestead (Malan 1995: 29). It is not just (household heads and) ritual specialists who could interact with the spirits:

Even ordinary citizens could disturb the spirits of the clouds and prevent rain. The prohibition of field labour (*ongondji*) was clear proof of this. When awaiting rain it was not proper to hoe dry fields, because rising dust might disturb the ancestral spirits preventing rain.

HILTUNEN 1993: 74

It would be easy to assume that it is simply the influence of Christianity that explains both the figuring of Jesus as a 'sacred other' and the notion that his power to control the spirits comes from a divine origin. It is possible, nevertheless, that autochthonous cosmology is also at play, as the more remote *Kalunga kaNangombe* is in a position of power over the spirits:

As Creator, [*Kalunga*] is endowed with the highest authority and power over the whole of creation, including the spiritual beings in the supernatural realm. However, the involvement of Kalunga with the everyday lives of human beings is believed to be very restricted, consequently no active worship is directed at him. He is seen as a vague and far-off being, who is only referred to during very unnatural circumstances.

MALAN 1995: 28

However, the clear indication in the title *kaNangombe* (that is, *of Nangombe*), as well as Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo's identification of the field exorcism (by appeal to *Kalunga kaNangombe*) happening 'in culture', suggests that not all of the participants would equate the power originating in the Christian God and the power originating in the Supreme Being of pre-missionary Owamboland.

Does the ethnographic material give us a broader context for understanding the Iihongo interpretations of Jesus' actions and person as 'spirited'? Certainly, the encounter described between the disciples and what they thought was an *oshiluli* (Mark 6:49) was understood to be particularly terrifying, coming as that *oshiluli* would from the 'fearful abode of spirits' to the west (Hiltunen 1993: 36) and operating under the cover of darkness, particularly associated with spirits and witchcraft (Hiltunen 1986: 54. Particularly notable is the negative connotations of both nighttime and the prefix *oshi-*: 1986: 59). However, Jesus' 'otherness' meant he was positively interpreted as having spirit *capacities* but as upending the notion of a dangerous, threatening *oshiluli*. A complex and dynamic relationship between Christianity and pre-Christian worldviews is suggested by the fact that, at points, interpretations 'borrow' from or are clearly informed by autochthonous understandings or demonstrate some form of hybridity (the wind and waves *being iluli*, Jesus walking in spiritual form *with some qualities resembling those of an oshiluli*). At other points, however, participants were reluctant to appropriate Jesus into the Iihongo context (Jesus was *not* operating '*in culture*' to challenge the storm, he was *not an oshiluli*). This illustrates the complexity of cultural evolution as a process: 'autochthonous worldviews' and 'Christianity' are not monolithic or bounded cultural-religious systems; rather, 'culture' in Iihongo (as anywhere) is dynamic and evolving, drawing on both (as well as other) influences. Nonetheless, pre-Christian influences are visible in understandings of natural systems and spirit-agency therein, verbal address of spirits, and persistent and pervasive concern about spirit beings. A resistance to the inculturation of Christianity is demonstrated by desires not to assimilate Jesus into the spirit-network (here, as an *oshiluli*, elsewhere into the *aathithi* community: see Chapter 7). An element of discontinuity or waning influence of the 'traditional' appears in the diminishing valuation of *oonganga* (diviner-healers).

3 Iihongo Interpretations of Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52 in Dialogue with Eurocentric New Testament Scholarship

3.1 'The Elements'

When set against the Iihongo interpretations, it becomes apparent that Western (here, historical-critical) scholars tend to talk of the winds and waves in meteorological terms, illustrative of a cultural framework in which natural phenomena are not usually understood to be infused with any form of agency. This is in stark contrast to the conviction that natural phenomena might be (or house) spirits. Lieu does suggest that the wind (or the restless sea) might have

been associated with, for example, 'forces of chaos' (Lieu 1997: 64; however, she refers to the 'processes of nature' on the same page). Adela Yarbro Collins, too, notes that Jesus' command in 4:39 for the sea to be 'muzzled' (2007: 261) is reminiscent of God commanding the waters to be held back behind gates in Job 38:8–11, and is suggestive of a competing, personal force. However, such issues are sidelined in the final interpretations, which show preference for naturalistic descriptions of the elements, deeming the 'supernatural' unhistorical and 'other'. If not viewed naturalistically, still other depictions of winds and waves are put forward. It is suggested, for example, that the waters may perform only an instrumental function in 6:45–52, enabling the disciples to witness an epiphany (Yarbro Collins 2007: 334). As Pieter Craffert argues, however, historical-critical interpretations are often borne out of a Western, ethnocentric, and ontologically monist worldview (2008: 55); that the Iihongo participants did *not* describe natural phenomena in the same way makes Craffert's point all the more apparent.

The links made by the Iihongo groups between 4:35–41 and verbal command of spirits in their context (not least in the whirlwind and field exorcism examples mentioned above) lend weight to the 'influential interpretation' of this narrative as 'a sort of exorcism' (Beavis 2011: 92, referring to, for example, Twelftree 2007: 116–7). These commands may echo the 'shouts' that Graham H. Twelftree suggests add to a sense of 'battle' in personal exorcisms (2007: 115). Other scholars have attempted to bring to the fore 'magical' aspects of biblical worldviews (Mills 1990; Klutz 2003, 2004). Mills certainly highlights the significance of verbal command and the power of names but does not explicitly link *epitimaō* (here discussing Mark 1:25) – 'a technical word for control of spirits in this period' – with 4:39 (where the verb is used again) or focus on spirits in nature or the landscape with reference to New Testament texts (Mills 1990: 97). In the commentaries surveyed, the lexical similarities with exorcisms are noted, but once again sidelined (for example, Hooker 1991: 139). Many scholars suggest that the language of rebuke is merely symbolic (Mann 1986: 274; Hooker 1991: 139; Marcus 2000: 337–8; Yarbro Collins 2007: 261). It may also be significant that the co-textual partner in Mark is the narrative of the Gerasene Demoniac (Marcus 2000: 336, Funk 1998: 77), although, if a 'prelude', Mary Ann Beavis queries why their exorcistic vocabularies do not harmonise (2011: 92).

Interestingly, Mills references the capture of a wind demon in a skin and its transport back to Jerusalem as described in the *Testament of Solomon* (1990: 57), which is striking in its similarity to the Owambo rainmaking ritual described above. She also cites exorcism formulae to drive away demons from the household in Aramaic and Mandaean bowl texts (1990: 29; see also Marcus 2000: 338–9). Otherworldly agency behind whirlwinds has also been

suggested (Marshall 1978: 333; Yarbrow Collins 2007: 259). Elsewhere, holding evil spirits 'responsible for inclement weather' is mentioned (for example, Yarbrow Collins 2007: 261) but this is one step removed from actually understanding winds and waves *to be* evil spirits, as did the grassroots interpreters in Iihongo.

3.2 *The Figure of Jesus*

Examined through the lens of Western biblical studies, with its 'scientist ethos' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988: 10) and an apparently 'rationalist' perspective, the miracles, including the so-called 'nature miracles', become problematic. How can stories involving a person overcoming natural forces (the storm) and then walking on water (the sea) be deemed 'historical' or 'real' (notably, loaded terms)? Salvaging 'reality' necessitates the suggestion that God directly intervened in the world, temporarily suspending the laws of nature. Otherwise, the conclusion is commonly drawn that the Calming of the Storm is a 'symbolic' narrative alluding to the stormy conditions in which the early church found itself, and that it is attributable to early church tradition – it is 'the fictional product of the believing community' (Funk 1998: 77). Jesus 'defied the law of gravity' by walking on the water (Marcus 2000: 428) and so, suggest certain Western historical-critical scholars, the narrative could have originated as an epiphany (Funk 1998: 93), or this may be a displaced resurrection appearance (Madden 1996: 138–9, cited in Malina 2002: 352). It may indicate docetic qualities (Hooker 1991: 168–9), align Jesus with God as the opponent and conqueror of the sea (Yarbrow Collins 2007: 328; Marcus 2000: 337, 340),⁵ or place Jesus in the category of the gods, more generally (Funk 1998: 76). Overall, then, Eurocentric interpretations struggle to affirm that 'real' events might lie behind the narratives of 4:35–41 and 6:45–52 in that they depict ultra-high Christology.

Given its own cultural context, it is perhaps unsurprising that Western scholarship (at least, at its Eurocentric core) often packages these narratives as 'problematic' texts. Within them, it considers the 'natural elements' (Yarbrow Collins 2007: 262)⁶ or 'inanimate powers' (Marcus 2000: 340) best interpreted metaphorically or as personifications (Marcus 2000: 339) rather than as actually animated. In discussing 'the menace of the elements' (Bultmann 1972: 216), Western scholars have not often paused to explore their own culturally-rooted constructs of the natural world. For Eric Eve, the problem is not just that the narratives pose difficulties for contemporary Western science: they are also

5 God is depicted several times as walking on water in the Hebrew Bible (Job 9:8, 38:16, Sirach 24:5).

6 This is particularly disappointing given Yarbrow Collins's extensive survey of Jewish, Greek and Roman understandings of non-material agencies behind wind in her 2007 commentary.

'no doubt' problematic from the viewpoint of 'ancient common sense' (2002: 383) and have a 'highly symbolic character'. It is clear neither how Eve determines the boundaries of 'ancient common sense' nor why spirit beings might not feature within a reality perceived by that 'common sense'. Furthermore, and rather contradicting his conviction that they are merely 'symbolic', he notes that the Calming of the Storm 'has elements of an exorcism story' (2009: 115, 116).

In Iihongo, by contrast, the narratives were not problematic at all. This produced the interesting result that the miraculous element of 4:35–41 shifted – rather than it being extraordinary that Jesus overpowered the storm, in Iihongo the extraordinary element was seen to be the source of the power by which he was able to do so. This resonates with Mills's suggestion that Jesus' 'inner dynamism' or 'indwelling divine energy' is what sets him apart (1990: 98, 101). Likewise, she argues, the apostles may be distinguished because 'the source of their power is different' (1990: 118). However, the negativity that Mills highlights as attached to other practitioners, aligning them with Satan (for example, Acts 8:4–13), is not evidenced in the Iihongo interpretations. In 6:45–52, the miraculous feature was not that Jesus walked on the water but that he was unique in his ability to metamorphose from physical to spiritual and vice versa. It was in his spiritual form that the majority understood him to have walked on the water.

The Iihongo perspectives support the interpretation of 4:35–41 as an exorcism. They also highlight the marginalisation of (attempts to appreciate) the reality of spirits in certain worldviews or lived experiences by the 'rationalist' perspectives of many Western interpreters. In spite of the fact that contemporary Christian worldviews actually incorporate their own forms of spiritual experiences, scholars are resistant to the notion that spirit-engagements might be depicted in biblical texts. Biblical spirit encounters (explicit or implicit), or those encountered in lived experience in other cultural contexts, tend to be depicted as 'other', 'magical', or 'problematic'. They simply do not conform to Western (and, perhaps, confessionally-derived) scholarship's understanding of a 'spiritual' experience. This is amply evidenced by Marcus's comments about 6:45–52: he suggests that it is Mark's concern to refute the charge that the disciples experienced 'a hallucination' (2000: 428). However, Marcus's perspective dictates that the disciples see *either* Jesus *or* a hallucination, and not that they (albeit not in this narrative setting) might have experienced a *real spirit presence*.

Conventionally, historical-critical Western scholarship focuses on the world 'behind' the text, asking questions of historicity and attempting to discern strata of tradition in the gospel accounts, with the eventual aim of identifying

the earliest layer of any given text (thereby indexing age with historical accuracy). In this way, it attempts to establish which gospel narratives depict 'real' events in the life of Jesus, and which are products of the evangelists or early church communities. However, this relies on the assumption that earlier texts can (or must) be equated with a higher degree of originality, less embellishment, *and therefore greater historical precision*. This, however, is a textocentric perspective.

In addition, the particular construct of 'reality' that informs this approach is not often acknowledged. Attempts to establish what is 'real' and the standards against which one might judge 'reality' are grounded in worldview. Even seeking to answer the question of 'what *actually* happened', then, would be to adopt a culturally imperialist approach (see Craffert 2008 on the ontologically monist bias of Western scholarship), entrenched as that question is in scientific, 'rationalist' discourse. And yet, determinants of rationality are culturally located, thereby filtering 'reality' through a contextual lens: whether one should verbally address a whirlwind and how one explains its subsequent diversion away from the homestead will vary according to one's worldview (and there were different perspectives on this, even amongst the Iihongo participants). It follows that it is inappropriate to apply contemporary Western scientist/scientific measures of reality to events described through the lens of other worldviews. That would include, for example, Jesus addressing and calming a storm, with which the Iihongo example of addressing and diverting a whirlwind would seem to correspond; it would clearly be unfair to judge the 'reality' of (a text narrating) the Iihongo spirit-whirlwind by the empirical standards of contemporary Western science. The same can be said for (texts narrating) Jesus' calming of a storm.

Failing to acknowledge 'reality' as a construction and/or the highly contextual nature of their own interpretive location, it is perhaps unsurprising that many historical-critical scholars in Western contexts have struggled to appreciate fully the reality of spirit experiences in other cultural contexts, including (potentially) communities from within which gospel traditions emerged.

4 Iihongo Interpretations of Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52 in Dialogue with Social-Scientific New Testament Scholarship

The trends in Western historical-critical scholarship outlined above (which fail adequately to acknowledge the reality of the spirit world), do not – or should not – have the final word. A brief discussion of a selection of interdisciplinary studies on Jesus' activities and person will foreground alternative voices, in the

hope that they might deliver diverse readings of Jesus' interactions with the wind and the waters.⁷

Social-scientific interpreters of biblical texts correctly encourage us to widen our horizons and evaluate differently, in the light of alternative social and cultural realities, what might be deemed 'real' or 'historical' in the texts that we consider. If we acknowledge, with Malina, that reality is a fluid concept, being 'socially interpreted' (2002: 355), it follows that the naturalistic pursuit of 'reality' or the 'historical' is not going to deliver its only form. Scholars ought to widen their interpretive fields and consider alternative worldviews. For me, that is to reach beyond a Eurocentric, demythologised and scientific perspective and to consider worldviews in which a complex of spirits may be active in the material existence of individuals and communities. This enables a fresh consideration of the 'natural' phenomena and the activities and person of Jesus in 4:35–41 and 6:45–52. Indeed, biblical scholars engaged in social-scientific approaches frequently point out (i) the reality of spirits in 'the ancient world' as a 'traditional' society (Witmer 2012: 10, 13, 33; Borg 1991: 71; Craffert 2008: 85), (ii) that a considerable majority of the world's population experience 'Alternate States of Consciousness' and spirit possession (Pilch 1998: 53; Malina 2002: 354; Witmer 2012: 23f.), and (iii) the potential similarities between contemporary, agrarian, collectivistic societies and biblical societies (Craffert 2008: 28, 90–1, 105, 112; Witmer 2012: 15, 203). The fieldwork embarked upon in this cross-cultural study was situated in such an agrarian community for whom spirits were very much a lived experience, just as ASCs are more widely, according to John J. Pilch (1993: 233, cited in Malina 2002: 355). We might, therefore, expect resonance between the Iihongo understandings of spirits as part of the community's lived reality and those studies using a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary lens through which to view Jesus and his activities. Alongside resonance, however, certain trends in the (selected) social-scientific resources surveyed are in stark contrast with the Iihongo interpretations.

4.1 *'The Elements'*

Whilst some social-scientific works move beyond the naturalistic designations of natural phenomena that pervade Eurocentric historical-critical scholarship, other treatments attempting to present an alternative, cross-cultural approach have some of the same weaknesses identified in the preceding section. Marcus

7 A diverse selection of contextual responses to the Calming of the Storm can be found in John Vincent's edited collection (2011).

J. Borg's 'new vision' of Jesus is notable for its effort to take into consideration the reality of spirits. Ultimately, however, it fails to incorporate spirits (rather than just the Spirit) satisfactorily into the overall picture. There is little consideration of spirit agencies functioning in the natural world and landscape. Borg notes the Hebrew connection between the sea and 'a threatening force opposed to God' but explains it away via literary 'language and imagery', rather than reality (1991: 68). For him, 'symbolic elements abound in these narratives' (1991: 67), such that the Calming of the Storm cannot be 'historical' (1991: 69). It would seem, then, that he does not truly affirm the cultural reality of spirits in the 'primordial tradition', preferring to judge the events from within his own cultural framework (discounting the spirit-world – just what he has accused the academy of – 1991: 33). The spirits, in this case, are acknowledged and then largely ignored and the default 'symbolic' approach is adopted.

Considering treatments of 4:35–41 overall, discussion of ordinary experience of spirits in relation to the winds, waves and storms is limited. Given how vocal the Context Group are about the insights of cross-cultural studies, it is surprising that Malina and Rohrbaugh's *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* offers but a paragraph on 4:35–41, from which I quote: 'The wind and sea were uncontrollable by humans. In Israel they were believed to be controlled by spirits or demons, while non-Israelites personified them as deities who manifested themselves in the action of winds and seas' (2003: 164. See also 350). Malina considers 'the wind and sea' to be actors in the Walking on the Sea narrative, which is 'indicative of a society in which one might expect to find persons with ASC abilities.' Winds and seasons, he says, might be 'personified, or attributed to non-visible, person-like cosmic forces or powers' (2002: 358–9). In addition, the sea (as opposed to water) was considered 'a being' and was 'identified' with a 'deity' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003: 173).

There is little indication, however, of how Jesus or the disciples are interacting with these spirit beings and this would seem to be because the ASC pattern (for Walsh's model, see Malina 2002: 360–362) does not fit with this encounter. An encounter with nature-based spirits (intrinsically personal in an Iihongo setting because all spirit forces are individuals to be addressed: ancestors, unclean/evil spirits, restless spirits) is not deemed to be personal in a Western sense and therefore does not fit the model, in which a spirit 'figure' would be involved (Malina 2002: 356–7). Pilch explicitly states that 'alternate or non-ordinary reality includes those dimensions of reality in which God and the spirits are to be found' (2004: 17), thereby suggesting that ASCs *would* be necessary to engage with the spirits of natural phenomena. Alternatively, and whilst ASCs would be 'normal' for the setting (Pilch 2004: 5), if interacting with

natural spirits does not require ASCs, why is such a model used to discuss 'personal' spirit interactions? Having taken on board Pilch's point that those from alternate reality 'can and do visit ordinary reality' (2004: 18) – in other words, without the trance journeys of those in ordinary reality – the situation only becomes more complicated.

The Iihongo interpretations challenge both the dwelling location *of* spirits (an alternate reality) and the access route *to* those spirits (an alternate state of consciousness) that these members of the Context Group propose. For Pilch and Malina, those spirits are real only inasmuch as they may be experienced in – or visit from – an alternative reality. The Iihongo interpretations provide a stark contrast: one may experience spirits in the wind or the land in *ordinary* reality and such beings *belong* in ordinary reality.⁸ Craffert, too, offers a strong argument for rejecting the tendency to place the two realms in opposition, or parallel, noting that 'traditional worldviews' are 'unitary or interconnected' and that the idea of the 'material world' in such a context will be wholly different than that advanced by a 'scientific' worldview (2008: 172). There may also be a 'subtle' difference between understanding the elements to be controlled by spirits or to be subject to 'personification', as opposed to actually *equating* natural phenomena with spirits. It is clear, in any case, that the Iihongo interpretations provide an alternative to the claim that the wind was uncontrollable by humans.

The focus on verbal commands in the Iihongo discussions made apparent the possibility that 4:35–41 might be interpreted as an exorcism narrative (Iihongo interpreters connecting verbal address to spirits of both wind and land). At the very least, for the CCBIGs, that this was a spirit narrative (exorcistic or not) was made clear by the inclusion of a verbal address to the wind and waves. Whether Malina and Rohrbaugh's suggestion of a link with 'Demons/Demon possession' is indication of support for such an idea is unclear – they fail to elaborate further (2003: 164). Amanda Witmer, whose monograph is dedicated to understanding Jesus as an exorcist, does not deem the Calming of the Storm to be exorcistic, despite noting the lexical similarities in the command in 4:39 with personal exorcisms (2012: 157–8). Perhaps due to the perspectival limitations of Western scholarship, the spirits are limited to manifestations in persons, with a resulting lack of consideration for the land and elements.

8 Perhaps Pilch et al. would challenge this on the basis that the Iihongo cultural context might be one in which ASCs are *not* a feature. Hiltunen, however, draws attention to one report of diviners falling into trance states (1993: 41).

4.2 *The Figure of Jesus*

With regard to the person and role of Jesus, social-scientific treatments have attempted to establish which social 'type' he might have fitted into, given his cultural milieu. As Craffert has noted, which social type or role a scholar settles on is largely governed by which facet of the text they have deemed most 'authentic': sage (sayings); folk healer (healings); exorcist (exorcisms/healings); holy man/shaman (otherworldly behaviours) (2008: 70–1). However, the most popular of these in social-scientific biblical circles, or that which has come to the fore of late, is that of the holy man or shaman. This designation has found favour with Pilch, Malina, and Craffert, amongst others.

In reference to the narratives at hand, the significance of this designation is that a shaman is argued to be one who, in 'ASC cultures', has particularly ready access to the spirit realm. A shaman is identified, initiated, and trained, and then goes on 'sky journeys' on behalf of the wider population; he is the 'mediator to the divine world' (Craffert 2008: 71). He holds an important place 'in the hierarchy of cosmic powers', indicated by his walking on the sea and calming the wind, suggest Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003: 173). In addition, a holy man or shaman may perform extraordinary feats whilst in ASCs, which, in contemporary contexts have been documented on film (Malina 2002: 354). However, Malina's point here is rather confusing – he does not appear to be claiming that one could theoretically capture on film Jesus' walking on water – and is arguably rendered impotent by Pilch's clear conclusion that 'such an activity [walking on water] is simply not possible' in the material world (2011: 117; see also Craffert 2008: 86).

The designation of Jesus as a shaman by the above scholars would appear to elevate him to an extraordinary position in both narratives and, once again, serves to alienate spirit encounters from the ordinary lived experience of the rest of the community. As understood by the participants in Iihongo, this was not the way spirit encounters happen. Not only this, but the suggestion that spirit encounters take place in induced ASCs (whether the shaman's ASC experience or a collective ASC experience in which a figure is envisioned) would appear to 'other' the spirit encounter. That is, it *relegates* the spirits to an alternate reality and *denies* their participation in the wider community, understood in a collectivist setting as most definitely incorporating the living dead and ancestors.

Furthermore, the designation of Jesus as shaman is problematic in itself. The shaman, as presented to us in a cross-cultural model of a social type, is one who communicates with spirits in ASC experiences. However, those ASC experiences are much stressed to be experiences had by most of the world's

populations (quite a different claim from stating that most global populations have shamans):

Erika Bourguignon has demonstrated that visionary, trance-state experiences and other forms of ASCs exist in institutionalized form among most societies comprising world's population [*sic*].

MALINA 2002: 354

Ninety percent of these societies [488 examined by Bourguignon] reported one or more institutionalized, culturally patterned forms of ASC. Eighty percent of circum-Mediterranean societies shared the same experience.

PILCH 1998a, cited by Malina 2002: 354

In that, then, Jesus is not special, if most of the population would expect to experience spirits as, indeed, they do in Iihongo. If, alternatively, by 'institutionalized' forms of ASCs the authors above mean by way of a ritual practitioner, then Jesus' uniqueness as a shaman facilitating spirit encounters through ASCs loses its explanatory power. For, if one accepts that the social model of the shaman is a cross-cultural phenomenon, it is unclear how one might still argue for Jesus' uniqueness (if that is desired). Malina affirms Pilch's claim that 'Jesus is regularly described in the Gospels as a "shamanistic holy man," to use an etic designation (see Pilch 1998a; also 1996)' (Malina 2002: 356). However, based on the above, Jesus would be but *a shaman amongst shamans*. Indeed, Pilch notes the 'sky (or spirit) journeys' experienced by Paul, thus framing him in shamanistic terms, too (Pilch 2004: 4; 2005: 106). Otherwise, one must argue that Jesus is *a shaman above all other shamans*, a claim I am not aware to have been made by those promoting the shamanic idea in the first place. If they did so claim, this would require another level of justification (perhaps the source of Jesus' power – a divine source) that would actually render the shamanic aspect superfluous in the effort to explain Jesus' personage and interactions with spirits.

4.3 *Summary*

Whilst not an exhaustive treatment, the use of these points as touchstones has allowed me to highlight aspects of comparison and contrast with selected social-scientific treatments of these narratives.

Many of the Iihongo participants (in fact, the vast majority) drew explicit links between spirits and natural phenomena. Such strong links brought to my attention the sidelining of such discussion in both traditional historical-critical

analysis (in a Western context) as well as the more 'open-horizon' terrain of social-scientific biblical criticism. The majority position seemed to be to default to a symbolic analysis (even where commitments to cross-cultural sensitivity have been voiced; see, for example, Borg 1991), or to present natural phenomena as 'personified' but to offer minimal treatment of the narratives themselves (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003). This is particularly surprising given the explicit endorsement of spirits as part of the 'lived experience' of New Testament communities (Pilch 1993: 233).

In addition, one might have expected suggestions of stronger links between the verbal commands issued by Jesus in 4:39 and those in personal exorcism narratives, or at least for those to be developed into a consideration of the Calming of the Storm as a potential 'natural' exorcism (with Twelftree 2007). Neither was the case. Entirely separately, the Iihongo interpretations raise the question of why 4:35–41 is not treated as an example of ASC interaction with natural spirits. Whilst alternate reality is where 'the spirits are to be found' (Pilch 2004: 17), the ASC model was not applied here.

Lastly, Jesus was presented as a 'sacred other' by the Iihongo groups because his power over the spirits was deemed to come from a different source than 'traditional culture' (*omuthigululwakalo*). This is the point I would least have expected to find any resonance with social-scientific scholarship, attempting as that scholarship does to *situate* Jesus culturally, and not to 'other' him. Whilst it is evident that the Context Group acknowledge the reality of spirits for a (usually singular) New Testament context, it is evident that experiences with spirits are not seen to be ordinary and might only happen in a non-ordinary reality. Jesus walking on water (rather than calming the storm) fitted the depiction of Jesus as a shamanic figure (an abstract model), interacting with spirits in Alternate States of Consciousness (again, a model).

This is not to deny the 'explanation-rich category of altered (or alternate) states of consciousness' (Malina 2002: 354), but rather to sound a note of caution as to the level of explanation it can offer. The contextual interpretations offered here suggest that interaction with spirits need not be viewed as exclusively 'other' (alternate) and that recognition of the important place of the spirits in the 'lived experience' of the community (in ordinary states of consciousness) might be necessary. After all, even if every single community on the planet had institutional forms of ASCs, it would not be logical to conclude that every spirit interaction would fall under the ASC category. Further, the spirits themselves should not be othered: an Iihongo sense of community incorporates these spirits and ancestors into the very fabric of society, hence their accessibility.

Likewise, the shamanic model: certainly, it allows for a fuller understanding of the role of ritual specialists in non-Western cultures. But it remains a model and is admitted to be an 'etic designation' (Malina 2002: 356). It does not go so far as to position Jesus as shaman above shamans, thereby failing to explain what precisely was unique about Jesus as a ritual specialist. Under the same category would fall Ezekiel, John the Baptist and Paul, amongst others (Pilch 2004).

Importantly, the Iihongo interpretations (where they drew on autochthonous worldviews) did not offer a resolution to the question of the uniqueness of Jesus, either. On the one hand, the participants drew on autochthonous understandings of spirits (*iiluli*) to explain his activity in the narratives. On the other, however, they resisted inculturation: he was not actually an *oshiluli* and was not likened to an *onganga* (which would cooperate with the shamanic model). It is possible that as a non-*omundonga* (as an outsider), he could not possibly draw on 'traditional culture' (to engage with spirits in nature), an idea that recurs in Chapter 7. To make a 'sacred other' of Jesus is perhaps suggestive of hybridity in worldviews in Iihongo today, thereby revealing the flaws in models of static, bounded cultural contexts as suggested by some social-scientific interpreters. Quite possibly, Jesus' 'uniqueness' is explained best by his *not* being an *omundonga* (Ndonga person). In Iihongo, Jesus is necessarily 'other'.

Finally, then, social-scientific interpretations (such as those of the Context Group) remain limited by their reliance on constructed 'cultures' and abstracted 'social types' to the extent that generalisations overtake particularities in cross-cultural comparison. For example, directly placing 'Mediterranean believers' (unqualified) in opposition to the 'scientifically sophisticated Western believer' is, at best, alarming (Pilch 2004: 3). Despite much being made of the similarities between the contemporary, homogenised, 'circum-Mediterranean culture' (Pilch 1999: 164) and 'the [singular!] New Testament world' identified by Malina (2001a), real communities in that apparently analogous context (or any other) are not asked for their reflections on either the texts themselves or the interpretations returned by the academy. Further, dialogue in Iihongo suggests that discussion of Altered (or Alternate) States of Consciousness (ASCs), much a feature of Pilch's work, may be yet another tool to 'other' experiences of spiritual beings. After all, it suggests that spirits are experienced only in an 'other' state, not in everyday, ordinary reality, but in a parallel, or alternate reality. So, whilst cross-cultural approaches such as these may have attempted to throw off naturalism's 'ethnocentrism' (Craffert 2008: 55), the Iihongo interpretations have demonstrated the extent to which social-scientific interpretations still 'other' the biblical contexts. They suggest that the forms of consciousness in which spirits might be encountered are non-normative ('other') and the

spirits themselves must exist in an 'other' realm. The modelled 'cultures' and 'social types' upon which these arguments rest sacrifice particularity for generalisations – exoticised, 'other' settings and roles.

5 Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that the participants drew on autochthonous worldviews and practices in their interpretations of the Markan 'nature miracles'. Specifically, pre-Christian notions of spiritual agency (that of *iluli* and *oombepe dha nyata*) in natural phenomena would appear to be influential in a contemporary context. This included, additionally, the idea of witchcraft as a cause of the storm in 4:35–41 and the belief that *Kalunga* would deliver destructive weather patterns as punishment. Participants referenced the verbal address of whirlwinds, and the engagement of forces behind thunderstorms, lightning and rain as contemporary practices; these are echoed in the verbal address of nature-based spirit forces noted in ethnographic literature.

Foundationally, this has demonstrated (in concert with Chapter 5) the enduring concern with autochthonous understandings of a complex of spirits coexisting with the living community in Iihongo. Interactions with spirit beings were depicted as ordinary, and not the exclusive remit of ritual specialists. The children, however, presented these engagements as those they had observed in their parents, as opposed to their own actions, perhaps suggesting that these 'traditional' behaviours are to be enacted by senior members of the household. Whether the children themselves expected to go on to engage spirits in a similar way was not determined. Either way, whilst 'nature spirits are rare in Southern Africa' (Nürnberger 2007: 271, n.105), they have endured and do exist here.

When I enquired about verbal commands over nature, I was asked whether I meant 'in culture' (*omuthiguluhwakalo*) or 'in Christianity' (*uukristi*). There must be a perception, then, of two parallel systems (here, offering two sources of power). From this arises the conclusion that Christianity coexists with autochthonous worldviews and practices (or power sources) in contemporary belief or practice. Nonetheless, there were aspects of discontinuity that arose in this round of meetings: *oonganga* were described as ineffectual and even disingenuous, suggesting a waning regard for traditional medicine (this point, and the equation of Christianity with hospitals, is noted elsewhere – see Chapters 5 and 7).

Having established that the Iihongo participants readily associated natural phenomena with the spirits (with whom they coexist in the material world), the extent to which Eurocentric historical criticism has sidelined spirits became

apparent. Certain individual works in the broader context of the study of the Gospels encourage us to fully acknowledge the spirit or 'magical' dimension of the New Testament context (Mills 1990; Klutz 2004). However, in the case of Mills, there is a marked gap in the treatment of the landscape and nature, the author focusing on the possession/illness result of spirit activity (for example, 1990: 97 and 117). This is somewhat in line with the dominant trend, which is to acknowledge but then sideline the spirits of the natural world (thereby denying their agency in the worldviews behind the narratives) and to default to naturalistic (or 'personified') descriptions of weather phenomena and a symbolic interpretation of these narratives.

Given the extent to which social-scientific (and particularly anthropological) approaches promote a focus on the worldviews other than those dominating the Western academy (those predominantly relying on naturalistic/scientific epistemologies), it was striking that the social-scientific studies consulted did not satisfactorily incorporate the spirits into their depictions of the ordinary worlds that form the settings for the narratives. Whilst moving beyond naturalistic designations of the wind and the sea, for example, many social-scientific approaches focused on spirits but relegated them to another realm by suggesting that they were to be experienced in ASCs (and even then, they are persons alone, not persons as spirits in/of natural phenomena). ASCs (and therefore spirits) were deemed part of the 'lived experience' of biblical communities (Pilch 1993: 233) but, crucially, this does not deal with personal spirits in natural phenomena as fully a part of the material experience of the natural world. This, perhaps, serves to explain why 6:45–52 becomes a significant focus for the attentions of the Context Group (being 'a classic example of an ASC experience' [Pilch 2011: 116]), with 4:35–41 falling short – ASCs did not provide a 'fit'.

Another point of interpretation from Iihongo focused on the tradition of addressing spirits in nature and the landscape through formulaic, personal, verbal command, in connection with 4:35–41. Direct links were made with commanding whirlwinds and exorcisms of land when discussing the Calming of the Storm. I suggested that the Iihongo example of addressing and diverting a whirlwind might provide a fruitful comparison with Jesus' addressing and calming of the storm. This supports Twelftree's conclusion that it might be a natural exorcism and challenges those works that put such an interpretation to one side in favour of a symbolic reading. Again, links were made with exorcism in social-scientific criticism; for example, the tag 'Demons/Demon possession' was attached to both of these narratives (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003: 164, 173). However, the personal aspect of spirits in nature has not been the focus of much discussion of 4:35–41 overall.

It also became clear that Jesus' calming of the storm was 'othered' by the Iihongo participants: his power to engage the spirits in the wind and waves derived from the Almighty and *not* from traditional culture, thereby refiguring the miraculous element and casting the spotlight on power source rather than action. Jesus was understood to be a *sacred other* (possibly because he was not an *omundonga*). Interestingly, despite positioning Jesus as a shaman or holy man (which would make Jesus unique in the context of Western scientism but merely one among many such persons in a culturally appropriate setting), at least some social-scientific scholars concurrently argue for Jesus' unique position in the 'hierarchy of cosmic powers' when referencing both of these narratives (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003: 164, 173). I have suggested that they do not justify this step from *shaman* to *uniqueness* (and nor does the designation shaman equate to this uniqueness) but note that it resonates with the sacred othering of Jesus on the basis of power source found in the Iihongo dialogues. The twin-influenced interpretive stance of the participants (drawing on autochthonous and Christian perspectives) may serve to challenge the desire of social-scientific critics to position Jesus (or the gospel traditions about him) within a singular, static, cultural context. As the Iihongo discussions illustrate, Jesus' actions or the traditions about him would derive from heterogeneous contexts, within which his personage/actions would not fit a singular model.

Finally, I presented the oft-repeated conviction from the Iihongo participants that Jesus' activity (walking *above* and not *on* the water) and very person (traversing the water in spiritual form) should be interpreted through a spirit-tinted lens. Jesus was presented, after all, as one who could transition from physical to spiritual at will, thereby relocating the miraculous element from the walking on water to his voluntary metamorphosis. Traditional historical criticism, however, with its commitment to the ethnocentric, ontologically monist worldview (Craffert 2008), cannot affirm such an interpretation. Another, more 'historical' explanation is sought. Interestingly, social-scientific criticism also struggles to affirm the 'reality' of such an experience, resorting to 'othering' tactics. Interactions with spirits happen, according to many social-scientific scholars, through the medium of ASCs. Of particular focus were interactions through and of shamanic persons or with 'someone from the realm of God' (Jesus) (Pilch 2004: 3). That is, person-centred spirit encounters (envisioning shamanic Jesus or envisioning post-Easter Jesus) drew more attention and discussion than interaction with 'natural' spirits. Indeed, the model of ASCs does not 'fit' with the spirit engagement in the Calming of the Storm. Indicators of such an engagement with those persons are deemed to fit a pattern (outlined and applied to Jesus' walking on the sea by Malina 2002: 360–69), whilst the Storm narrative was little touched by the Context Group. The spirits

in an 'other' reality are accessed through a figure (shamanic or otherwise) who is 'other', and access is gained through an 'other' state of consciousness. They themselves are 'nonvisible' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003: 173), formless (Malina 2002: 367), 'other'. All of the aforementioned draws away from Pilch's designation of spirits (through ASCs) as part of the 'lived experience'.

Examining natural phenomena with CCBIGs has illustrated persistent concerns with spirit presences in everyday life in Iihongo; it has also highlighted how *far from ordinary* a spirit encounter is rendered by mainstream Western scholarship. It has also challenged the extent to which social-scientific approaches *genuinely* accommodate alternative worldviews rather than impose culturally imperialist models and constructed cultural settings with which to deal with 'problematic' texts and generate yet another (Western) version of 'historicity'.

Jesus as Spirit, Jesus in the Spirit: Interpreting the Risen Jesus with Restless Spirits and Ancestors (Luke 24:1–49)

The post-resurrection appearances in Luke 24 offered me the opportunity to investigate with the groups the theme of *Spirits* (and post-mortem existence, in general). This has been highlighted by Groop (2010) as an area of ‘traditional’ culture with which there remain strong ties post-Christianisation, and to which some turn to explain troublesome events. In a similar vein to Chapters 5 and 6, and related to the issue of spirits, I felt that the topic of the Resurrection would add to my understanding of contemporary perceptions of the person, and the legacy of pre-Christian understandings thereof, here including the person extended beyond the human lifespan. The text stimulated discussions about understandings of the self and the body, with specific reference to death rituals and post-mortem existence. We discussed responses to deaths in Iihongo (both in the homestead and community-wide). I attempted to elicit information about whether – and how (in a trance state, perhaps?) – people could be experienced or communicated with after their death. Furthermore, if one sensed a post-mortem being, how would they be recognised? Ultimately, I wished to know whether any connections might be made between the post-resurrection experiences of Jesus and experiences of post-mortem persons in Iihongo. Would the Iihongo participants anticipate experiencing their deceased in such a way as is represented in the text?

Having engaged the Iihongo participants in discussions about post-mortem existence and the person of Jesus, Luke 24 also offered the chance to explore Ancestor Christology. I wanted to introduce the fact that eminent African scholars have suggested various constructions of Jesus as an ancestor, and to establish whether the grassroots groups deemed an inculturation analogy appropriate in this case. Notable scholarly presentations include those of Jesus as ‘Greatest Ancestor’ (Pobee 1979), ‘Brother Ancestor’ (Nyamiti 1984), ‘Supreme Ancestor’ (Bediako 1995), and ‘Proto-Ancestor’ (Bujo 2006). Contextualised by the participants’ understandings of the *living landscape* (see Chapter 5), discussions of spirits and ancestors also involved references to various locations in the landscape (domestic, agricultural, burial), as well as the interpersonal networks of which ancestral spirits form a part (the social landscape).

1 Luke 24:1–49 in Iihongo CCBIGs

Post-mortem experiences in the form of restless spirits (*iluli*; s. *oshiluli*) became the focus of our discussion about the Resurrection, and the participants' understandings of the behaviours and qualities of an *oshiluli* informed their interpretations of Jesus' appearances. However, whilst the participants used this as a lens and drew comparisons with Jesus *as a spirit*, it was made very clear that the resurrected Jesus was not precisely like an *oshiluli*. Rather, his return was to be understood as 'in the Spirit'. As we saw in Chapter 6, then, the theme of the 'sacred othering' of Jesus comes to the fore.

1.1 *Iihongo Perspectives: Jesus as Spirit, Jesus in the Spirit*

In the English translation, the qualification 'Holy' both adds to an understanding of 'Spirit' and ties the Holy Spirit to the notion of spirits more generally. When Jesus appears to the disciples, they 'thought that they were seeing a ghost' (24:37); in that the terms 'Holy Spirit' and 'Holy Ghost' are sometimes used interchangeably in English (with ghost meaning immaterial being or soul), the association here between spirit and ghost is clear. In the *Oshindonga*, however, the terminology has quite a different effect. The *Ombepo Ondjapuki* (Holy Spirit) is a spirit, certainly (*ombepo* means spirit, wind or air), but is clearly distinguished from an *oshiluli* (restless spirit). The *oshiluli* of traditional culture has been imported into the biblical tradition but, significantly, is not interchangeable with *ombepo*. One would not, for example, speak of the *Oshiluli Oshiyapuki*. It is specifically an *oshiluli*, a (negative) spirit of the restless dead, that the disciples fear they see in 24:37. This will clearly have a bearing on the interpretation of the passage.

In our consideration of the Resurrection and the associated appearances, the groups were asked to consider whether interaction with the dead was possible and/or expected in their own context and whether this translated into their understandings of the narrative in Luke. As the extracts demonstrate, the notion of someone returning post-mortem to their homestead, community, or locale sits quite comfortably with autochthonous worldviews. The comments indicate that the majority of participants would anticipate experiencing the deceased in spiritual form, as an *oshiluli* (or, positively, in a dream). That is, waking experience of spirits is expected to be negative, as *iluli* are troublesome, threatening presences. Additionally, as soon as the deceased's spirit has been recognised by a waking person, many participants stated that the spirit would immediately vanish from sight.

Firstly, then, to the ways in which the deceased were reported to be experienced in Iihongo: most participants, even if they initially expressed the

opinion that they would not expect to communicate with deceased members of the community, had their own experiences or knew traditions of deceased people returning (often to the homestead). Positive encounters and communications with the deceased, as they arose in our discussions, were limited to dream experiences, which were discussed across all CCBIGS:

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| Memekulu Maria Kondo: | In dreams, sometimes you can dream the deceased, them being in the house, visiting you, sitting with you. |
| Martha Nangolo: | Yes. When, for example, your mother dies and you miss her you see her in your dreams. |
| Author: | Is it really her? |
| Martha Nangolo: | Yes, it is really her. You hear the voice and even see her wearing the same dress she used to like. |
| Tatekuku Laban Iyambo: | But in the dream you can communicate with him, talk with him, even walk with him and laugh together but it is a dream. |
| Author: | So, was it real or not actually an experience of that person? |
| Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: | You are sleeping, you do not open your eyes. But your spirit sees that person. So, your spirit and the spirit of the dead are connected together by God. They are experiencing each other. |

However, the suggestion that we were dealing with a dream or trance state in the experiences of the risen Jesus in Luke 24 was rejected. The disciples were said to be ‘in a natural state’, ‘normal’, seeing ‘with their own eyes’ and ‘not even sleeping’, and seeing Jesus ‘with their own senses’ (Memekulu Victoria Mvula, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo, Wilbartina Teofilus, Maria Johannes, respectively). We focused, instead, on waking experiences. A returning member of the community whose immediate presence is sensed by the living whilst awake (indicated to occur via various sensory media) is known as an *oshiluli*, a restless spirit, whose presence has negative connotations:

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| Maria Johannes: | Communication is sometimes there because one person died and came back as an <i>oshiluli</i> . |
|-----------------|--|

Okanona ANON ₁₂ :	One person was raised from death and came to the house and beat all the people in the house. [Okanona ANON ₁₂ expressed the view that this person returned from death in a physical capacity.]
Memekulu Victoria Mvula:	Long, long ago we heard about our foremothers that some people died but came back as <i>iiluli</i> .
Memekulu Victoria Mvula:	Sometimes the person is dead, but he is seen by other people.
Tatekulu Laban Iyambo:	<i>Oshiluli</i> is a dead person. You used to bury a dead person but if you meet that person you buried, you call that one an <i>oshiluli</i> . [They are] not physical and some people after death we believe people go to heaven. If that person does not believe, then God turns them back to go to Earth and repent. So that person wanders on the Earth. But in spiritual form, not physically. You never see a believer come back. You will not see him again.

Such a spirit might be expected to be experienced wandering amongst the community, or in the homestead. Tatekulu Laban Iyambo suggested that they often wander the bush or the graveyards, noting that 'where the bodies live' is 'their home area'. When asked why the *iiluli* are still active at all, Memekulu Maria Kondo suggested that 'he or she is in his or her own area. They have a right to be there', again suggesting the strong links between deceased and place in Ndonga worldviews (see Chapter 5).

The above autochthonous understandings of post-mortem existence and communication with the living (in dreams and as *iiluli*) would appear to impact upon the interpretations of Jesus' post-mortem appearance by confirming his 'spiritual' appearance to the disciples (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo, Hileni Iiyambo, Maria Johannes). The extent of the links between the community and the deceased (or the 'living' and the 'living-dead') is furthered when one takes into account the ancestral spirits (*aathithi*) who dwell in the locality. However, the discussions focused largely on *iiluli*, given that it is a (necessarily problematic) 'restless spirit', an *oshiluli*, that the disciples think they see in 24:37.

The feeling that such an experience engenders was noted by several contributors (Ester Nicodemus, Memekulu Maria Kondo, Memekulu Victoria Mvula),

and was neatly summed up by Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: ‘you get afraid and shocked’. This is associated perhaps not only with the unusual nature of the encounter but also the threat *iiluli* pose (arising in several CCBIGs), given that they were said to strangle (Erastus Kuutondokwa, Memekulu Maria Kondo) and beat people (Hilma Ikukutu), to ‘eat all the food’ (Ananias Imbondi) and to ‘destroy’ property (Elizabeth Imbondi). In the context of Iihongo, for the disciples to (i) think they see an *oshiluli* when a dead person is encountered, and (ii) to experience fear because of it, is entirely understandable.

Secondly, many remarks suggested that *iiluli* can only be seen fleetingly. This, too, found resonance in the interpretation of this passage. It was explained that when one sees the *oshiluli*, the moment of recognition of the deceased is swiftly followed by their disappearance. Recognition actually engenders disappearance of the *oshiluli*. It was suggested that this process could be mapped onto the narrative at hand, explaining why (on the road to Emmaus) Jesus vanished having been recognised (24:31):

Memekulu Maria Kondo:	The person, when you see him, he disappears very quickly.
Author:	Jesus is with the people in the story but then he disappears. Is this the same as the local experience you describe?
Memekulu Victoria Mvula:	Yes.
Memekulu Maria Kondo:	Yes, it is just the same – the local person disappears when you recognise him.
Tatekulu Laban Iyambo:	[Responding to a query about the length of time an <i>oshiluli</i> experience lasts, not about who is able to see them.] Even in the same area, when you go there you can be told by others that you should not go through a certain area of bush because there is <i>oshiluli</i> . You can go there with a friend and maybe you can’t see anything, but your friend will say, ‘look, <i>oshiluli</i> !’

The Iihongo interpretations of Luke 24 clearly offer us a vision of Jesus as in some ways akin to the local spirits: he has returned from death (only expected in the case of an *oshiluli*), is understood to be in spiritual form at least some of the time (cohering with autochthonous understandings of *iiluli*, *aathithi*, *oombepo* and *oompwidhuli*), and disappears upon recognition by his companions on the

road to Emmaus (said to be 'just the same' as the local experience of rapidly-vanishing *iiluli*). However, several factors were also highlighted in the discussions that distinguish him and stress the Iihongo interpretations of his being 'in the Spirit', rather than 'as spirit'. For example, at no point was conversation with an *oshiluli* mentioned in our discussions. Overall, the very fact that Jesus' companions could see (albeit not recognise) and converse with Jesus as a material being (24:16f., 37f.), perhaps touch him (24:40), and that he was able to eat as a material being (24:42–3), means he could not be an *oshiluli*, which had been indicated (at points) to be 'just' or 'like' a spirit and therefore invisible:

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| Ester Nicodemus: | The person, the physical body, you can recognise him during the day. But an <i>oshiluli</i> you can only find him during the night. |
| Author: | Do they have a shape? |
| Ester Nicodemus: | No, they are not a shape. You can just maybe hear the voice. |
| Loide Petrus: | <i>Oshiluli</i> is something like a spirit. You can even hear the voice, but you will never see anything. But a living person you will see around with a body. |

Descriptions from the previous chapter also suggest the immateriality and/or invisibility of an *oshiluli*:

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Memekulu Julia Iiyambo: | Yes, sometimes in the water you hear the sound of footsteps on the water, but you look back and cannot see anything on surface of the water. This is in the night. And you can even see the bush moving but there is nothing in the bush. |
| Loide Petrus: | ... they are just wind [<i>ombepo</i>]. |
| Hileni Iiyambo: | <i>Oshiluli</i> is weightless. It is just a spirit. |

For some, the eating of the fish proved to be a key factor in the interpretations for discerning that this was Jesus in physical form (even if he initially came to the disciples in spiritual form) and not an *oshiluli*:

Tatekulu Laban Iyambo:	Jesus asked them to provide him with food to eat because he wants the disciples to get more understanding about his presence. That will confirm that this is truly [the] Jesus that they know.
Frieda Shilemba:	He wanted to demonstrate that he was not <i>oshiluli</i> but the person they knew before.
Okanona ANON ₃ , Loide Petrus, Martha Nangolo:	[All agree].

However, it is clear that such distinctions are not as clear-cut as they might first appear: at various points in our discussions, some participants stated that *iiluli* can be seen, touch living people and objects, and receive and/or eat food offerings (sensory perception/engagement):

Tatekulu Laban Iyambo:	Not all the people can experience or see people who are dead. Only some. I have heard about it that some people have seen . Sometimes you feel a mysterious feeling in you. But I have not seen someone who is dead.
Meme Maria Kashowa:	But if you see someone who looks physical [but is not], that is only <i>oshiluli</i> .
Memekulu Maria Kondo:	Even when sleeping you might feel something strangling you . That is <i>oshiluli</i> .
Elizabeth Imbondi:	One person was dead but came back as an <i>oshiluli</i> and he came back to their own house [homestead: <i>egumbo</i>]. A family member decided to cook <i>oshimbombo</i> [porridge] and a whole chicken with enough oil. They put it at the <i>ehale</i> [entrance] to the <i>egumbo</i> . Then the <i>oshiluli</i> came and ate it and then they were not seen again.

Whilst Jesus' disappearance shortly after being recognised on the road to Emmaus (24:31) was understood in light of the rapid disappearance of an *oshiluli* who has been recognised, clear distinctions were made between the narrative and the Iihongo context, again cementing Jesus' status as a 'sacred other':

- Author: You said that when people see someone who has died walking around the locality, they recognise the person who died very shortly before the deceased disappears. What is the difference here?
- Memekulu Maria Kondo: Because this is a true resurrection.
- Author: So, this is different from experiencing someone else after death?
- Memekulu Maria Kondo: Jesus' presence was long in the walk with the disciples whereas in our community [the experience] is something else [a brief presence before the deceased disappears].

This sense was furthered in the understanding that Jesus entered the room where the disciples were gathering (24:36) by spiritual means but then appeared physically. This was one of the unique traits the participants perceived Jesus to have – the ability to metamorphose at will between non-material and material states (and vice versa):

- Maria Johannes: He came there through the power of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, Jesus *is* the Holy Spirit. He came there spiritually and became flesh in the room.
- Hileni Iiyambo: I agree he can change because he appeared [physically] to the disciples in the room [having got there spiritually]. (CCBIG Mark 6:45–52)
- Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: Jesus is the almighty and he is also a spirit, so it is easier for him to come amongst his disciples.
- Author: Do you mean that he is not limited by being a physical being?
- Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: Yes, exactly. He can go wherever he wants.
- Author: Is he physical or spiritual?
- Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: He comes there spiritually.

The above comments would seem to suggest that there were indeed similarities between the behaviours of *iiluli* and the risen Jesus. In order to carve out a distinction between the two, justifications were offered, notably with regard to the food:

- Memekulu Victoria Mvula: He was familiar with them so can ask for food from them.
- Memekulu Maria Kondo: He had been three days in the tomb. He is hungry.
- Author: Is this the same as feeding someone who keeps returning home as an *oshiluli* after their death?
- Memekulu Victoria Mvula: No. Jesus is a different person. He is not the same as the people in our community.

A further way in which the participants elaborated on our discussion of *iluli* and distanced Jesus from association with their traits was in reference to diviner-healers and witchcraft. One participant suggested that communication with the dead was possible when witchcraft (*ulodhi*) was involved:

- Author: Who can communicate with their deceased?
- Memekulu Victoria Mvula: Some people have it as a gift, but others go somewhere to learn from someone. They learn from an expert. We call [the experts] *oonganga* and *oompulile*.
- Translator: *Oonganga* are witchdoctors. *Oompulile*: I am not really familiar with this term, but it is connected to the verb *pula*, 'ask'. You ask something of these people.
[*omupulile* (variant: *ompule*): 'clairvoyant diviner', 'a person who enquires from spirits' (Hiltunen 1993: 132, 116); 'the highest ... *oonganga* in the Ovambo hierarchy' (Aarni 1982: 16).]
- Loide Petrus: There is a story of one child who was studying and if that student somehow did not understand the lesson in class, she prayed to her [dead] grandmother who was an *omulodhi* [witch] and the grandmother gave answers to her granddaughter. It is a story from Onankali [30km East].

Indeed, why it is that a person returns to disturb the living community could be directly connected to their status as a witch (*omulodhi*; pl. *aalodhi*) and/

or dissatisfaction with their burial, distribution of possessions, or corpse-modification (the latter being a preventative measure against the return of a witch's spirit). Several people revealed preventative measures against the return of a witch's spirit, as well as prescribed actions for an *oshiluli*'s appearance:

Memekulu Maria Kondo:	Sometimes, before a person died, they might tell you to cut off their foot or hand [when they die] and if you don't do it you will see them again. [A discussion followed between Kuku Maria, the translator and me, in which it was established that cutting off the corpse's feet would prevent the spirit from walking the Earth as an <i>oshiluli</i>].
Okanona ANON ₃ :	Such persons, in order to die and [not] come back sometimes they may instruct the family: If I am dead, bury me in the <i>egumbo</i> or at the <i>ehale</i> [entrance] and if this is ignored, they may come back.
Loide Petrus:	And sometimes people may instruct to cut off the tip of the tongue or the nose and if you don't do that, they are angry, and they come back.
Author:	Why would someone want the tip of their nose or tongue cut off?
Loide Elago:	It is because he knows himself that if you don't do that he will come back.
Translator:	Because he knows he is a witch and that is how you stop him coming back, to reduce his power.
Memekulu Victoria Mvula:	When the person sees the deceased one and the parents [of the deceased] find out, the parents [translator adds: or family] have a way to take the person out of the community.
Author:	How would they do that?
Memekulu Victoria Mvula:	They have their own way to say goodbye to him.

Memekulu Maria Kondo:	If [the deceased] used to come into the home, they slaughter a chicken and make <i>oshimbombo</i> [porridge] and they put that food at the place he liked to be during the evening, and in the morning, you find nothing left.
Author:	Is this today or in the past?
Memekulu Maria Kondo:	Even nowadays. That is the only method to say goodbye. After he has eaten, he is gone forever.
Elizabeth Imbondi:	That <i>oshiluli</i> just came back to the <i>egumbo</i> , sometimes disturbing the things. The family member was instructed by someone to cook the food to stop them coming back. If the person eats the food [and it is] well-cooked, he thanks and goes. [Elizabeth says it is not hunger that brings the spirit back.]
Author:	Who instructed them to cook the food?
Elizabeth Imbondi:	They were instructed by an <i>onganga</i> [diviner-healer].

This may explain comments about the fact that Jesus' companions on the road to Emmaus did not recognise him, as well as the disciples disbelieving his presence in verses 36–43 – they did not expect Jesus to come back. For a person to return after death to 'wander the Earth' in the context of Iihongo is conceived of negatively, and often in connection with witchcraft (*uulodhi*). Given that the participants do not associate Jesus with *uulodhi*, it follows that they would be surprised if the disciples anticipated Jesus' return from death, as an *oshiluli* or otherwise.

In summary, the participants felt Jesus was better understood 'in the Spirit' rather than 'as spirit', thus distinguishing him from local spirits and emphasising his status (as seen in the previous chapter) as a 'sacred other'. It was easy to distinguish him from an *oshiluli*, given that Jesus was viewed positively and *iiluli* negatively. Further, that he is not associated with witchcraft would mean he would not be expected to return, and must, therefore, be returning in a capacity unlike that of an *oshiluli*. His spiritual form, contrasting with that of autochthonous spiritual beings, was explained by his unique ability to

metamorphose from spiritual to material state at will, again reiterated from the previous chapter. Overall, then, the participants distanced local spirits from Jesus 'in the Spirit'.

1.2 *Ihongo Perspectives: Jesus as an Ancestor*

In order to investigate another area of the autochthonous spirit complex in Ihongo, I initiated discussions with the participants on the topic of ancestors (*aathithi*). The purpose was to discover more about local understandings of, attitudes to, and practices surrounding the *aathithi* but also to raise the suggestion put forward in contemporary African biblical scholarship that Jesus might be conceived of as an – or the ultimate – ancestor.

Before considering whether Jesus might be thought of as an ancestor, I seek here to present the discussions from the CCBIGS on the nature, role and significance of the *aathithi*. Views were divergent, with some arguing that belief in ancestors was not part of the tradition, whilst others described clear beliefs in ancestral spirits and such practices as pouring libations for the *aathithi*. For Tatekulu Laban Iyambo, the oral traditions of the forefathers were important, but it was to this that he confined 'belief' in ancestors:

Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: He influences the community for example before he/she died he/she may instruct the people either to do good behaviour, to co-operate with one another, to love one another, and to help one another. Then, after the death, people like to turn back to his/her ideas. If they experience some people doing bad behaviour they like to turn back to the ideas of that [deceased] person by reminding others that that person told us not to do that. But other than that, after death there is no influence.

Author: Do people still think of ancestors as powerful forces in the community?

Tatekulu Laban Iyambo: We do not believe in ancestors, but we believe in what our forefathers told us. For example, they told our fathers or forefathers about how we have to live and gave us a code of conduct on how to live with each other, so we only refer to that and not to the ancestors.

For the women and children, on the other hand, the ancestors seemed to be of greater significance:

- Okanona ANON₁₀: Some families have their own private graveyard where they put their first forefathers [*aathithi*] within their land.
- Hileni Iiyambo: They are our forefathers who died long ago but their spirit is good, not like the *iluli* who disturb you. *Aathithi* do not disturb you.
- Author: What do they do?
- Translator: I have heard that some may go to the graves of forefathers to ask for wisdom.
[The children were not aware of this phenomenon.]
- Author: What do you know about *aathithi*?
- Hileni Iiyambo: According to the story from our grandmother, *aa-thithi* are spirits of the deceased, staying in some areas. For example, if you drive the car where the *aathithi* are staying you have to make a hoot. If you do not hoot, then your car will get stuck. If you remember, maybe your car will then start. And for the woman, if you carry something like a clay pot of *omalovu giilya* [traditional beer], then you stop and pour some out on the ground. If you do not do that the pot would fall and break. This is long ago, not now.
- Author: Are they active now?
- Hileni Iiyambo: Not disturbing anyone. They do not enter into the house. They just stay where they are. For example, in the field. But you cannot go into the field of *aa-thithi* and build your house. Then they will deal with you. But *iluli* are cruel and will disturb you.
- Author: Do you know an *aathithi* field?
- Hileni Iiyambo: Yes, even at our village [*ombuma* village, in the Iihongo district], they are there.
[9 children in the group know an *aathithi* area.]

However, when faced with the idea that Jesus might be considered an ancestor, the women and children wholly rejected the idea, emphasising Jesus' special nature:

Author:	What do you think of the idea that Jesus could be thought of as an ancestor? Is Jesus an ancestor?
Children:	[Unified 'no', with a degree of disbelief to boot.]
Author:	Why not?
Frieda Shilemba:	Jesus is just the Son of God.
Ester Nicodemus:	Because Jesus after death was raised from death and was seen by his disciples during the day but <i>aathithi</i> cannot be seen during the day.
Hileni Iiyambo:	Because Jesus was dead by the power of God so that people may know the way of death and resurrection.
Memekulu Hileni Nendongo:	No, Jesus is not an ancestor.
Memekulu Maria Kondo:	No, he is not an ancestor.
Author:	Why not?
Memekulu Maria Kondo:	Where the <i>aathithi</i> are staying you do not pass by without stopping to ask if you can pass or if you are in a car you press the hooter. If you do not do that, the car will get stuck.
Memekulu Hileni Nendongo:	Jesus is the Holy Spirit.

With regard to ancestors, it is unfortunate that I failed to ask Tatekulu Laban Iyambo directly the question of whether Jesus might be thought of as an ancestor. However, given his response (above) to enquiries about ancestors in general, perhaps it is possible to speculate that he might affirm the Jesus traditions as a moral guide as he does ancestral oral traditions but not Jesus as an ancestor. For the women and children, that Jesus is not to be regarded as an ancestor may be summarised in the following factors: Jesus' origin and power source ('Son of God'/'Holy Spirit') sets him apart from the Iihongo community; Jesus was raised from death, which the *aathithi* are not; Jesus was seen during the day, which *aathithi* cannot be; particular rituals are associated with *aathithi* (libations), which are not associated with Jesus; finally, the purpose of Jesus' life was seen to be divinely ordained.

2 Ethnographic Contextualisation

Having given an overview of the key discussion points in the CCBIGS, I now take forward the salient themes into conversation with African scholarship on Ancestor Christologies, after a brief ethnographic contextualisation to determine the ways in which these discussions point toward the enduring significance of autochthonous worldviews and practices. The key points are as follows:

- i. Experiences of post-mortem persons (*iiluli*) are a current reality in dream and wakefulness, with the social world of the Iihongo residents expanded to include the deceased.
- ii. Overall, Jesus has *iiluli*-like attributes but was ultimately presented as a 'sacred other', whose post-mortem existence was unique. *Iiluli*, having association with *uulodhi* (witchcraft), are negative and therefore distanced from Jesus.
- iii. *Aathithi* (ancestors) are a current reality, with even the youngest participants being aware of their existence and enduring location: both geographically and socially, they are 'in place'.
- iv. Jesus should not be understood as an ancestor, despite positive connotations of the latter.

Both the nature and role of spirits (*iiluli*, *oombepo dha nyata*, *oompwidhuli*) have been dealt with extensively in the previous two chapters, so I will not revisit covered ground. In summary, autochthonous understandings of spirits are well-documented in ethnographic literature on the area (Aarni 1982; Davies 1994) and are noted to be present in the contemporary worldview of local populations (Groop 2010). The discussions in this round of CCBIGS support Mbiti's assessment when related to Iihongo context:

The invisible world presses hard on the visible: one speaks of the other, and African peoples "see" that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world.

The spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and ... these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them.

MBITI 1990: 56 and 74

What I focus on here is ancestral spirits (*aathithi*), given the notable resistance of the CCBIGS to figuring Jesus as an ancestor (or to the current presence of ancestors at all, in the case of Tatekulu Laban Iyambo). Ethnographic literature on Ndonga (and wider 'African') worldviews indicate that the *aathithi*

(*Oshikwanyama: ovakwamungu*) are the restful dead of the community. I use the terms living-dead and *aathithi* to indicate two stages of post-mortem existence: (i) that of the named, remembered, familial deceased, existing in personal immortality (Mbiti 1990: 82), and (ii) unnamed 'generic' ancestral spirits (Hayes 1992.1: 62), what Mbiti calls 'full spirits' existing in 'collective immortality' (1990: 83, 160).

Aarni makes a distinction between the named living-dead, or *oohe nooyina*¹ (lit. 'their fathers and mothers'), and the nameless *aathithi* ('spirits'/'shades') in his concise treatment of the Ndonga ancestors (1982: 60–4). Although his use of terminology is somewhat inconsistent, the CCBIG discussions support this distinction in that participants talked about 'the ancestors' as unnamed but significant figures from amongst the ranks of the deceased; after all, they will not all remain named and known forever. Aarni thus makes an effort to convey the process by which the named, familial dead cease to be remembered over time and therefore experience a 'second death' into nameless *aathithi* status (1982: 63, 43). As Ronaldo M. Green explains, in continued progression through the gerontological structure, a person assumes a place of enhanced authority and power in the community during elderhood, and then to an even greater degree post-mortem (1983: 7). Although they no longer have a physical body, as living-dead they are still very much a person and their invisible presence is very real and close, being "everywhere around us" (Aarni 1982: 64). This chimes with Rodney L. Reed and Gift Mtukwa's suggestion that 'the cult of the ancestors in the African context is the extension of community to the members of the community who have physically died' (2010: 7).

By contrast, Davies stresses the 'ancestor' group as a subset of the *aathithi*, arguing that not every deceased person achieves ancestor status. Whilst they can achieve *aathithi* ('immortal parent') status by virtue having descendants, not being a witch/sorcerer, having a reasonably long life and proper burial rites, to become an ancestor is more difficult. Davies argues that the criteria are as follows:

Ancestors can be said to be the dead who: (a) have received proper burial, (b) are named, (c) held politico-jural status whilst alive, (d) were (are) morally upright, and (e) have descendants or successors.

DAVIES 1994 3: 14

1 I do not use this phrase because (a) it has arisen neither during my time in Iihongo/wider Owamboland nor in any written context without reference to Aarni, and (b) he coined it himself (Davies 1994 3: 13).

However, her treatment is ultimately found wanting in that it assumes that all matrilineal systems must have the same conception of ancestorhood (1994 3: 14–16) and it does not offer any sense of distinction between the recently and long-term deceased of the *aathithi* class. There is at least one other term available to distinguish ‘ancestor’ from ‘ancestral spirit’: *aakulu yonale* (ELCIN 1996: 9; lit. ‘the elders from earlier’), which is a particular reference to the status (‘elders’) of deceased community-members, touching on Davies’s points (c) and (e). The term speaks to their physical rather than spiritual existence. However, this does not deal with the transition between named and unnamed *aathithi*.

The ongoing connection the deceased have to the living community is as fundamental part of the social world (hence the term ‘living-dead’ or, indeed, *aakulu yonale*), within which the distinction between living and dead persons is not as stark as it is within Western conceptions. Tellingly, Igor Kopytoff describes the existence of African ancestors as ‘mundane’, pointing toward the ordinariness of their existence in the social world as ‘above all[,] elders’ (1971: 140, 138). Their existence has a further dimension, however, in that they have greater access ‘to the spirit world and to the non-human powers’ than do the living (Aarni 1982: 61). Diviner-healers, in turn, have better access to the ancestors overall, perhaps even being able to see them (Aarni 1982: 47). The living community, for its part, has inherited from the living-dead their biological life force, land and cattle, the last being ‘a means to get in touch with the ancestors’ (Aarni 1982: 63). In return, the living sustain the living-dead both in memory and through libations. The living desire the continued benevolence of their familial *aathithi*, who may intervene in their lives as ‘helpers, protectors and guides’ (Aarni 1982: 62), whilst the chief’s ancestral spirits may bring rain (Tönjes 1996: 180). Meme Maria Kashowa suggested a connection with healing, too: ‘our forefathers would ask the ancestors for the power to heal people’ (*Oomeme*, CCBIG Mark 5:21–43). Estermann (on the Kwanyama) also notes that the ancestors were said to play a collaborative role in specific ‘supernatural’ pursuits, such as blacksmithing, hunting, and warfare (1976: 144–5, 127). However, they may also create significant misfortune if sent by a witch and may even penetrate the body of a living person (Hiltunen 1986: 61). Ambiguity about the intentions of the *aathithi* is also touched upon by Davies, who suggests that the *ovakwamungu* (= *aathithi*) of others ‘may cause harm, behaving like spirits of the west even though they are spirits of the east to their own lineage descendants.’ If one’s own *aathithi* cause harm, they are – unlike the ‘outsider’ *aathithi* – acting ‘purposefully and logically’ (Davies 1994 3: 25). Overall, then, the ancestors play ‘a functional role in the world of the living, specifically in the life of their living

kinsmen' (Kopytoff 1971: 129), with the living-dead being the immediate point of contact and communion for the living.

Mbiti suggests that the living-dead may make 'disturbing frequent appearances' to their kingroup, should they be 'offended before they died' or 'improperly buried' (1990: 83). That burial practice might influence a person's return, or lack thereof, was verbalised in the CCBIG session. However, whilst Aarni affirms the relevance of this for Ondonga (1982: 72), the participants in this study have only spoken of appearances of *iiluli*, not *aathithi*, elaborating with reference to *iiluli* as spirits of deceased witches (*aalodhi*). Even then, there has been a degree of ambiguity in response to the issue of 'seeing' an *oshiluli*. Nevertheless, reports from Kwanyama ethnographies discuss sorcerers (*Oshikwanyama: ehmule*) whose corpses require dismemberment in order to prevent the return of their malevolent spirits (*ounikifa*), and who are visible during twilight hours (Tönjes 1996: 182; Loeb 1955: 39; Estermann 1976: 190). Whilst this resonates with Reports in CCBIGs of *iiluli* and corpse-modification in Iihongo, it is notable that the equivalent term for *iiluli* in the Kwanyama dialect is, in fact, *oilulu* and not *ounikifa* (Davies 1994 3: 24). Nonetheless, in the final analysis, the idea of visually encountering ancestral spirits (which are neither *iiluli/oilulu* nor *ounikifa*) was rejected. This is understandable given that people are only understood to have one physical existence ('*omwenyo lumwe*' = 'one life': Kuusi 1970: 212) but does not hint at autochthonous foundations for fleeting glimpses of *iiluli*. Encounters in dreams, however, were acknowledged and are documented in ethnographies (Davies 1994 2: 47) and wider literature: 'where ancestors "appear", say in dreams, they appear in their full bodily form, exactly as they have been known to exist. They are not "spirits", but "presences" – the continuing presence of the past persons' (Nürnberg 2007: 27; see also Afeke & Verster 2004: 49, Reed & Mtukwa 2010: 12 on appearances in dreams).

There is, as well as the lasting community connection, a resilient bond with the land. As noted in many of the CCBIG sessions, the dead are understood to have a 'home area' (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo) connected to their burial site. This tallies with Mbiti's claim that 'the living-dead may be considered to dwell in the area of the graves' (1990: 83). The deceased were historically buried in or around the *omagumbo* (homesteads) and an *egumbo* would be relocated upon the death of the head of a family, again indicating the placed-ness of the *aathithi* and their role in the *living landscape*, albeit sometimes in the wild, liminal space beyond the *egumbo* perimeter (Davies notes the negative associations here: 1994 2: 41). That such an idea is rooted in autochthonous worldviews is reinforced by the special status of the king's grave, as well as its attendant ancestral spirits (Aarni 1982: 82; McKittrick 2002: 35).

The *aathithi* are territorial in defence of their burial sites, causing disturbances to those amongst the living who overlook them and proceed to build on such areas (Hileni Iiyambo). Their benevolence may also be tested by a failure to acknowledge their presence (and offer the appropriate libations), perhaps not incorporating the living-dead in community events or allowing social unrest to prevail amongst the living. Memekulu Frieda Namugongo hinted at measures undertaken to restore harmonious relationships, here in the case of a murder or manslaughter. Her example seems suggestive of appeasing the family of the deceased (presumably including ancestors) through the medium of blood:

- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: In Ndonga culture, if someone kills a person, that killer or the family of the killer should take a cattle to the Royal Palace [*ombala kwaniilwa*]. Then that cattle is slaughtered and the blood is run through without catching it [often it is caught for consumption]. This is an indication that you wash out your sin. This cattle is called *onkomba mbinzi* ['to wipe out the blood']. It is killed before the burial [of the victim]. The reason why they give that cattle, it is the sign to apologise to the family of the deceased and it is to prevent the killer from getting bad luck.
- Author: Is it important that the blood goes into the land?
- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: It is because you kill it before the burial. That blood must go into the ground before the victim [and his/her blood, presumably].

Furthermore, participants reported the shedding of cattle blood at an *ohango* (wedding), which, according to Tuupainen, ratifies the marriage and seeks the blessings of the *aathithi* on the union (1970: 62–3, 156), such is 'the magic power of blood' (1970: 57):

Translator:

At the wedding, you must give the cattle to slaughter. If you do not, then the family will not let the girl marry. If I visit and you slaughter even a chicken, I feel respected. [The implication is that blood is valuable and, if spilled, shows that an important transaction has taken place, or status has been recognised.]

Memekulu Rauha Andreas:

When it came to the wedding event the men used to [always do] give the cattle to the family of the girl so that they can exchange for the girl. The blood of the cattle pays for the girl.

Memekulu Frieda Namugongo:

In our tradition, as from our forefathers, the girl should be exchanged with the cattle. The price for the woman is cattle. When the day of marriage comes, people meet the cattle [being delivered] by shouting '*ipindi ya landa*' ['we get what we bought'].

The continuation of the individual after bodily death is the natural progression of an elder of the community into a place of higher status within a rigid hierarchy. Their status as living-dead is at once 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary': ordinary in the sense that they are part of the social order, are very *present* and *close*, with strong links with the community through land and cattle, but extraordinary in that they have moved into a position of heightened authority and power, with closer ties to the rest of the spirit world. They 'represent the archetype of moral conduct' because they 'no longer have faults' (Hiltunen 1986: 57) and are even more 'respected for their seniority and wisdom' than before (Aarni 1982: 61).

As has been demonstrated, the *aathithi* are very much 'in place', forming part of a complex web of relationships between kinsfolk, land and animals. The living kin and their animals, the living-dead, *aathithi* and other spirits are all intimately connected to the land – together they form the *living landscape*. Physical bodies (animate or in the form of corpses) anchor persons to locations, and blood (amongst other libations) forms 'a communication link to the invisible world' (Aarni 1982: 39; see also 47). In the finality of the 'second death',

however, most living-dead may be forgotten and transition into the nameless class of *aathithi*. Very few members of the community will be remembered several generations after their death, and perhaps only headmen, chiefs, kings and remarkable persons will survive to lasting historical memory. However, even the forgotten figures survive ‘in place’, be it in Iihongo, Ondonga, or in wider Owamboland. I turn now to examine how these ideas of ancestors ‘in place’ engage with and nuance interpretations of the person and role of Jesus in African scholarship.

3 Iihongo Interpretations of Luke 24:1–49 in Dialogue with African Inculturation Christologies

African theologians have sought to carve out inculturation Christologies² in an effort to find an expression of Christianity and the person of Jesus that truly resonates with African Christians in their cultural setting. To say that there is ‘growing influence and acceptance’ of these approaches is perhaps an understatement (Ezigbo 2014: 50). Amongst the most significant contributions to this effort have been those of John S. Pobee (Protestant, Ghanaian), Charles Nyamiti (Catholic, Tanzanian), Bénézet Bujo (Catholic, Congolese) and Kwame Bediako (Presbyterian, Ghanaian), all of whom have developed theologies associating Jesus (in various sophisticated and nuanced ways) with ancestral traditions in African worldviews.

Those African scholars who advocate an inculturation approach would see Christianity contextualised for an African audience, arguing that such titles as Messiah, Christ and Lord are themselves culturally-bound³ and not appropriate for the depiction of Jesus in African settings (Pobee 1979: 81–2; Masega 2010: 75). They are mindful of syncretism and perceived ‘dangers’ of an overly positive valuation of traditionalism (including associated ancestor traditions), whilst stressing the unhealthy experience of ‘dual religious consciousness’ (Masega 2010: 73f.). However, these scholars argue that Christianity’s relevance – and the abandonment of elements of traditional worldviews that they consider to be anti-Christian – actually depend on the development of an African, ancestor-based Christology, through which African Christians might better understand Christianity and the post-mortem existence of Jesus (and even the traditional ancestors themselves).

2 I focus here on inculturation approaches and leave aside liberation, or Black, Christologies.

3 Comparable, perhaps, to Eurocentric interpretations of spirits as symbolic, as seen in Chapters 5 and 6.

This section of my study aims to give a very brief overview of those Christologies, whilst not being drawn into a lengthy description of the individual theologies, for this has been done elsewhere (Schreiter 1992; Küster 2001; Stinton 2004). Of greater significance, here, is the extent to which the Iihongo interpretations and discussion differ from the Christologies of the above scholars. Further, I seek connections with other studies (from African biblical/theological scholarship) that have raised objections to the notion of 'Jesus the Ancestor' (Nürnberg 2007; Palmer 2008; Afeke & Verster 2004; Reed & Mtukwa 2010).

3.1 *Jesus as Ancestor*

He must be talked about in the local language, called by indigenous names and painted in local features, so that he is no longer a stranger but "one of us." ... it is the language about Jesus that needs to be brought down to earth.

MASEGA 2010: 75

There is considerable variety and nuance of approach in the ways in which in inculturation Christologies present Jesus as an ancestral figure. Pobee refers to Jesus as *Nana Yesu*, the 'Greatest Ancestor', stressing his superiority and 'chiefdom' over all other ancestors by virtue of his closeness to God and his nature as God (Pobee 1979: 94). Jesus should be understood as set apart, suggests Bujo, for he is 'Ancestor Par Excellence' and 'Proto-Ancestor' (2006: 79–83). He is similar to local ancestors, who function as 'a source of life for the next generation' (Reed & Mtukwa 2010: 15). However, the status of Proto-Ancestor, for Bujo, means having not genealogically primacy but status as model ancestor over the African ancestors as 'forerunners' (Stinton 2004: 120). This is not altogether dissimilar to Bediako's notion of Jesus as 'Supreme Ancestor' (1995: 217), with a prominent theme being the use of the *analogy* of an ancestor whilst simultaneously limiting the status of the human ancestors: Jesus is 'Lord among the ancestors' (1995: 228). For Bediako, the key feature of Jesus as ancestor is as a giver of life (Reed & Mtukwa 2010: 14) and as one through whom communities might better understand their human ancestors (notably, as myth). As Laurenti Masega adds, the 'main focus of prayer' is Jesus, not ordinary ancestors (Masega 2010: 76).

In the above, Christ as Ancestor is clearly placed in a hierarchical relationship to the 'natural ancestors', there remaining a 'qualitative distinction' (Bediako 1995: 218). Significantly, some 'see continuity between the cult of ancestors in African traditions and the doctrine of the communion of the saints held by some Christian churches' (Ezigbo 2014: 50), thereby challenging

criticisms of idolatry in reference to the continued ‘worship’ of ancestors (for example, Oduyoye 1986: 9, cited in Ezigbo 2014: 148). In *Christ as Our Ancestor*, Nyamiti suggests that Jesus may be conceived of as ‘Brother Ancestor’, with God as Father Ancestor at the top of the hierarchy (1984: 64, 84), presenting a different figuration of the sacred realm. He stresses five aspects of ancestor status in his treatment: ‘kinship’ (consanguineous or non-) with the living, ‘superhuman sacred status’, ‘mediation’ between God and the living, the right to ‘regular sacred communication’ with the living through oblations, and ‘exemplarity, as models of good behaviour’ (cited in Reed & Mtukwa 2010: 12). These he relates to Jesus’ life and status (with a kinship link drawn back to Adam), but stresses that the relationship to Christ supersedes ‘all clanic, tribal, racial or sexual distinctions’ (Reed & Mtukwa 2010: 19).

In searching for resonance between these theologies and the Iihongo interpretations, it is not easy to locate points of contact, perhaps because of the brevity (and other limitations) of the CCBIG discussions. Drawing on ethnographies and the CCBIG sessions, it would be possible to detail the facets of an Ndonga ancestor that would align with Jesus as inculturated by the esteemed African scholars above. However, this was not the way the participants articulated their Christologies. In consideration of the moral qualities, though, and picking up on Nyamiti’s fifth aspect, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo’s comments seem to suggest that he feels *aathithi* would be best understood as moral guides, leaving authoritative oral teachings – an ‘enduringly positive legacy’ (Reed & Mtukwa 2010: 9) – upon which members of the living community may later reflect.

3.2 *Objections to ‘Jesus as Ancestor’*

Diane B. Stinton’s study argues that ‘Jesus as ancestor is a controversial image’ (2004: 123). Timothy Palmer’s article, ‘Jesus Christ: Our Ancestor?’, certainly suggests as much, giving an interesting insight into the objections levelled, as well as the potential distinction between the heavily theorised notion of those in ‘ivory towers’ over and against grassroots understandings (2008: 73; see also Stinton 2004: 245). Palmer suggests that ‘at the grassroots there is still significant resistance to such a concept’ (2008: 65). Having tasked some eighty students with writing two pages on ‘the usefulness of calling Jesus their ancestor in the context of their own ethnic group’, Palmer relates the findings. Of the cross-section of Nigerian Protestant Christians,⁴ he says: ‘one is struck by the

4 In Stinton’s study, ‘Catholics were more favourably inclined toward the image’ of Jesus as ancestor. A higher level of theological education also engendered more positive responses (2004: 124–5).

almost universal rejection of the concept of Christ as an ancestor', with 96% being 'negative or cautious' about accepting the idea (2008: 69).

The reasons for rejecting or being hesitant about referring to Christ as an ancestor are illuminating, and resonate with the lihongo context:

1. Jesus did not meet the criteria for ancestorhood: dying in old age, dying naturally, being married and having children;
2. Jesus is not an ancestor because he has no connections with each student's clan (blood relationship) and land;
3. Jesus is not an ancestor because that would be a limited view of Jesus's role/existence;
4. Jesus is a healer. However, as well as healing, ancestors have the capacity to inflict harm or illness. Ancestors are dead ('albeit living dead') but Jesus is risen and living. Ancestors do not resurrect. Ancestors are merely human, whilst Jesus is divine;
5. Calling Christ an ancestor 'would be to endorse the cult of the ancestors', contrary to biblical teachings.

PALMER 2008: 69–72

The lihongo interpretations drew on similar arguments to suggest the unsuitability of the ancestor analogy. Notably Memekulu Victoria Mvula suggested that Jesus is other, 'not the same as the people in our community', perhaps echoing the sentiment that one must be an 'insider' to qualify for (inherently) in-group ancestorhood (point 2). Both the women and the children also explicitly linked the ancestors to the land (point 2). Memekulu Maria Kondo, picking up on point 4, stressed that Jesus would *not* act negatively on the living (the *aathithi* might do: for example, making cars get stuck when the living fail to offer the appropriate libations). The children's group echoed the danger of limiting Jesus' status by reducing him to ancestorhood (point 3) and that he resurrected, which would not be expected of *aathithi* (point 4). Tatekulu Laban Iyambo suggested that ancestor-belief and associated practices had subsided, except for their oral/moral legacy, an idea echoed by the translator when asking the children if they knew of consulting the *aathithi* in search of wisdom. Regarding Tatekulu Laban's point, and connecting with point 5, I speculate that the devout nature of his faith, combined with the area's long history of anti-'traditionalism', may fuel an inclination against notions of inculturation. The CCBIGs did not resist the 'Jesus as Ancestor' motif based on status-indicators that Jesus lacked (point 1: age/status, a natural death, descendants), although ethnographic contextualisation has highlighted the fact that this might be a background concern (Davies 1994 3: 14).

To draw analogies with Jesus, for Palmer's students (and echoed in the responses in Iihongo), would appear to limit him to a state of death, within a particular kin group (or clan, or tribe), and within a particular location, not to mention whether he could even be deemed to have qualified for ancestor status at all (see Stinton 2004: 130f.). These challenges, then, challenge Wanamaker's claim that 'Christ's death and afterlife are assumed to be of the same character as that of all the other ancestors', with the resurrection appearances being equivalent to 'visionary visitations of an ancestor' (Afeke & Verster 2004: 53). For Palmer's students, just as for the Iihongo interpreters, the equation of Jesus with ancestor just does not fit.

3.3 *Summary*

As Robert J. Schreiter argues, 'we need to know more about what ordinary Christians believe and confess about Jesus Christ' (2004: xi). This chapter has demonstrated that the Christologies developed by erudite figures in African scholarship are somewhat removed from the (albeit brief) grassroots responses of the Iihongo participants. Whilst the likes of Pobee, Nyamiti, Bujo and Bediako have found appreciative academic audiences for their inculturated depictions of Jesus as Ancestor, there is evidence of 'significant resistance' to such theologies amongst grassroots interpreters (Palmer 2008: 65), Iihongo residents amongst them.

The above cases rest on drawing analogies between the qualities of Jesus and those of the ancestors, as well as drawing on comparisons with the relationships between God, ancestors and the living. Jesus is conceived of in ancestral terms in that he lived an immaculately moral life, sustains the community, and acts as a mediator between humanity and God. Here we find resonance with the depiction of ancestors in Davies' study of the Aawambo (1994 3: 14). In addition, Tatekulu Laban Iyambo's observations about the *aathithi* find resonance with the African scholarship – he noted that the oral traditions the ancestors leave behind are of enormous value to the contemporary community (echoed by Hiltunen 1986: 57: they 'represent the archetype of moral conduct'). He was resistant, however, to the notion of 'believing in' ancestors as spiritual beings, a stance shared by those who wish to distance Christianity from ancestor reverence.

Not all African scholars join Nyamiti et al. in their quest to find an ancestral model for Jesus, with opponents finding problematic continued interaction with, or consideration of, mediating ancestors (for example, Sanneh and Turaki [Afeke & Verster 2004: 55–56]). Critics have pointed out that Jesus was not married, had no children, and died at a relatively young age, making his status as potential ancestor questionable (Palmer 2008). Further, the

intrinsic placed-ness and clan-centred notion of ancestors leads to questions as to whether the notion of Jesus as an ancestor is, in fact, an ethnocentric one (Reed & Mtukwa 2010). The *aathithi*, significantly, are linked to both people and place in Iihongo: 'they are our forefathers' staying in 'the field of *aathithi*' and 'they do not enter the house' (Hileni Iiyambo). In many ways, the descriptions from across the CCBIG sessions support claims that ancestors may be seen as 'the owners of the land' (Gehman in Afeke & Verster 2004: 50; see also Reed & Mtukwa 2010: 25).

As has been demonstrated, interpreters in Iihongo raised various objections to the 'Jesus as ancestor' metaphor. There were the titles ascribed to Jesus that were not suggestive of an equivalence: 'Son of God', 'Holy Spirit' (Frieda Shilemba, Memekulu Hileni Nendongo). Furthermore, the fact that the *aathithi* were 'in place' in Iihongo was implicitly contrasted with Jesus, highlighted by the capacity of the ancestors to chastise the placed living community: 'where the *aathithi* are staying you do not pass by without stopping to ask if you can pass or if you are in a car you press the hooter. If you do not, then the car will get stuck' (Memekulu Maria Kondo). The appearances of the risen Jesus also contradicted autochthonous understandings of post-mortem existence: 'Jesus after death was raised from death and was seen by his disciples during the day but *aathithi* cannot be seen during the day' (Ester Nicodemus). Finally, the case was made that some do not believe in the post-mortem existence of ancestors, although their wisdom was to be respected (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo). The Iihongo discussions, then, raised terminological, spatial (and implicit moral), physiological and ontological issues in their rejection of the central tenet ('Jesus as ancestor') of African inculturation Christologies.

4 Conclusions

The discussions of Luke 24 offered clear examples of the persistence of autochthonous worldviews and practices. Here, these relate to practices surrounding death; mention was made of moving huts and kitchens, relocating the homestead entrance, or even moving the entire homestead upon the death of the head of the household. Similarly, burial rituals are indicative of pre-Christian concerns and practices (corpse-modification, private graveyards: '*aathithi* fields'). Inheritance practices, too, pointed towards the traditional or matrilineal descent and inheritance system (for example, clothing to matrilineal relatives, sticks to namesakes), rather than the patrilineal system encouraged

by the missionaries (Yamakawa 2009: 120; Haugh 2014: 188–192). Lastly, this chapter has echoed the findings of those previous (5 and 6), which found that autochthonous beliefs in post-mortem existence (*iiluli*, *aathithi*) remain foundational to the Christian participants in Iihongo. In this chapter, that came to the fore in descriptions of practical measures taken to deal with the return of restless, deceased (but still ‘placed’) members of the community (the laying out of a prescribed meal, upon the instruction of an *oonganga*), as well as discussions of the nature and role of ancestors (*aathithi*) and witches (*aalodhi*). The overview that I have presented suggests that ancestors remain, as they were in life, very much ‘in place’; their social ties with the community continue through libations and they remain anchored to the land in *aathithi* fields. As with *iiluli*, they are a part of what I have referred to as the *living landscape*.

Despite the fact that the autochthonous beliefs and practices mentioned above remain current (or, at the very least, in current consciousness), others are declining in significance. For example, Elizabeth Imbondi mentioned the instructions of *oonganga* to prepare a set meal for a returning spirit but noted that this was a story related by her grandmother, rather than part of Elizabeth’s own experience. There was no recognition from the children, either, of the practice of consulting the *aathithi* to gain wisdom. The discussions also suggested that Christian practice dominates mourning rituals (prayers, hymns, expressions of hope for resurrection). There was little suggestion of pre-Christian funeral rituals, although I note that both Tatekulu Laban Iyambo and Maria Johannes stated that an ox would be slaughtered at the *egumbo* of the deceased. This may still have autochthonous ritual significance, as did the ox-slaughter in the wedding (*ohango*). In addition, (at least the memory of) corpse-modification remains.

It was experience of post-mortem beings – or ‘presences’, if Nürnberger’s contention is accepted (2007: 27) – that particularly informed Iihongo understandings of Luke 24. In this regard, Jesus shared something in common with *iiluli*, to whom he was likened (perhaps partly because he existed in a liminal spiritual-physical state post-mortem, but certainly) because he vanished when his companions finally recognised him on the road to Emmaus (24:31). However, there were also clear differences. Jesus was experienced for a protracted period of time (24:15–30), which was not expected of post-mortem beings in Iihongo: no sooner would they be recognised than they would vanish (Memekulu Maria Kondo). With regard to ancestors, that the risen Jesus had been seen during the day served to distinguish him from *aathithi* (Ester Nicodemus; cf. Palmer 2008: 71; Wanamaker in Afeke & Verster 2004: 58).

And, given that experiences of *iluli* as restless and disturbing spirits can only be negative (Memekulu Victoria Mvula), the resistance to association of Jesus with ancestorhood was highlighted all the more.

Just as they had done with the 'nature miracles', the lihongo women and children's groups sought (with the aforementioned critics) to distance Jesus from the local setting; they argued that he was different – he was a 'sacred other'. They were distinctly uncomfortable with aligning him with the 'mundane' ancestors (Kopytoff 1971: 140). In the previous chapter, the power that Jesus drew upon to control the wind and waves was from God, not from traditional culture. In this case, Jesus' titles were invoked as examples of precisely why he was neither *an* ancestor, nor *the* ancestor: he was 'Son of God' (Frieda Shilemba), not *aathithi*. In both cases, Jesus seems to be elevated over and against the 'traditional', the autochthonous. This directly challenges Bujo's stress on a 'Christology from below' (see Stinton 2004: 118–123), in which he would bring to the fore Jesus' human and earthly ministry. The lihongo participants preferred to stress his unique and sacred qualities.

Overall, Memekulu Maria Kondo summed up the sacred otherness of Jesus by saying, 'this is a true resurrection.' In an Ndonga setting, post-mortem experiences of the deceased (*aathithi* or otherwise) are not understood in terms of resurrection. There was resistance, then, to association of Jesus with the *aathithi*, who are presences in the locality and landscape, but are not resurrected – they are 'only' spiritual presences. The presence of pernicious *iluli* is more keenly felt, certainly in a physical sense, but neither are they resurrected. And, ultimately, *aathithi* and *iluli* are post-mortem spirits/presences of humans, not of human-sacred beings. As was the feeling with Palmer's group, 'there are too many fundamental differences between Christ and the ancestor' (2008: 73). Whilst Emmanuel Martey is convinced that the metaphor 'fits' (cited in Stinton 2004: 138), this was not the case in lihongo.

It is also important to consider why there might be such a gulf in perception between Jesus Christ and the *aathithi*. I offer two central suggestions. The first, with Victor I. Ezigbo, is that 'the missionaries succeeded in creating an impassable chasm between Christianity and the indigenous cultures of Africa, producing Christians who saw the indigenous religious traditions of Africa as anti-Christian, or viewed Christianity as the great defeater of African indigenous cultures' (2014: 46; cf. 2014: 44–5 for his discussion of Byang Kato's work). Whilst we see elements of interpenetration between Christianity and local culture, opposition against *omuthigululwakalo gwaaNdonga* seems historically to have been predominant on the ground in Ondonga. The missionaries vociferously denigrated and decried the beliefs and activities involved in *uupagani* ('paganism') whilst positioning *uukristi* (Christianity) at the polar

opposite (McKittrick 2002: 9–10). Such marginalisation may have taken root in the collective consciousness such that it now underpins resistance to inculturation in this instance. Perhaps that is why there is still a pronounced perception of parallel (rather than totally integrated) systems: Christianity (*uukristi*) and Ndonga culture (*omuthigululwakalo gwaaNdonga*) are ‘brother and sister’. In reference to this, I recall West’s reference to Wimbush’s claim (albeit contextually different) that ‘the early encounters with the Bible among African Americans are foundational for all subsequent biblical interpretation’ (2007b: 31).

It is notable, too, that Christianity was most closely associated with the church building in Iihongo, as well as local hospitals:

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: | We are more focused on Christianity at the church centre. |
| Memekulu Rauha Andreas: | The hospital and Christianity are associated like brother and sister. |

Local culture came to the fore with the realm of the *egumbo* (homestead): ‘culture is more at home but only the culture that is good [goes] to church’ (Memekulu Frieda Namugongo). The children also reported sleeping ‘traditionally’, rather than ‘by Christianity’. It is arguable that the *aathithi*, too, would fall within the non-church realm, engaging with ideas of *egumbo*, *aathithi* fields, pre-missionary culture and oral wisdom. Perhaps this might further the distinction between the *egumbo*-based *aathithi* and the church-based Jesus.

However, the response of the Iihongo groups might be otherwise explained, which gives rise to my second suggestion. The category of ancestors – *aathithi* – is simply not analogous with the depiction of the post-mortem appearances of Jesus. That Jesus was present in body and made physical contact, entered the house, ate, was seen in the day and experienced more than momentarily meant that he did not correspond to the autochthonous understandings of post-mortem presences of *iiluli* or, more importantly, *aathithi*. The sense of his otherness is highlighted further when one takes into account the critiques of the inculturation approach. Some have argued (with the Iihongo contributors), that ‘Christ is totally different from all the others and does not fit in with the idea of a primal ancestor’ (Afeke & Verster 2004: 58). To others, the whole concept of Jesus as ancestor may be an ethnocentric one, given that ancestors are linked to family and land (Reed & Mtukwa 2010).

For the Iihongo participants to accept Jesus as *aathithi* would be to claim him as an *omundonga* (an Ndonga person), both rendering him a tribe member and denying his unique sacredness, as well as disassociating from the

missionary influence that is, I imagine, still of significant influence in the collective memory and oral tradition. The dynamics of power and agency at work in such a situation are complex: are the participants protecting Jesus' identity within a Christian framework, or protecting autochthonous conceptual and social matrices from Christianisation? Alternatively, is the 'Jesus as ancestor' concept simply a failed analogy? Reverend Dr Nambala offered an explanation as to why that might be the case:

Nyamiti, Pobee, Mbiti and others, they are from heavily cultural, African cultural contexts – it is unlike ours. In our own contexts, ancestors did not play that great a role. So, that's why the group rejected it, because they never thought of calling their ancestors to assist. It is unlike in other African contexts: South Africa, Kenya, and so on. There, the ancestral spirit is quite, quite strong. Of course, even here, you can maybe read through their behaviours and see that they are calling their ancestors, but it is not that strong. So, that's why they rejected it.

REVEREND DR SHEKUTAAMBA V.V. NAMBALA Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) Interview, 23rd June 2015

Any particular location (such as Iihongo), has an incomparable set of variables that uniquely coalesce (autochthonous culture; experience of mission; encounter, interpenetration and hybridisation of cultures) and therefore demands a particular Christology to be developed for it to be a successful articulation, appropriate to the local cultural-conceptual sphere. The results of Palmer's and Stinton's studies, too, indicate that it would have to be actively taught; such ideas do not grow organically from the ground up (that assumes, of course, that at a grassroots level the nature of Jesus is not understood – that did not appear to be the case in Iihongo). The development of such Christologies is also deeply engaged in a sensitive debate about the status of local traditions and it is not always entirely clear what is the driving force: are inculturation Christologies required because 'Africans need help to understand the person of Jesus' (a deeply patronising argument), or, in the first instance, as a way to incorporate positively valued, local traditions surrounding (in this case) ancestors?

Perhaps, in the end, the inculturation Christologies are too abstract and theoretical for this context, within which experiences of the deceased are a current, lived reality. As in many contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Iihongo there is a 'strong emphasis on community', with the ancestors playing an 'essential role' in that social body (Reed & Mtukwa 2010: 13). Contra Dymond (1950: 150), belief in ancestors has been demonstrated to be anything but 'futile' in this

Owambo context. However, into that milieu, Jesus as a member of the *necessarily local* deceased simply does not fit: ‘he is not the same as the people in our community’ (Memekulu Victoria Mvula).

That Jesus is *not* an ancestor is indicative of the clear demarcation drawn by the participants between things ‘cultural’ and things ‘Christian’. Regarding certain topics, ‘traditional culture’ (*omuthigululwakalo*) and Christianity (*uukristi*) are ‘like brother and sister’, mutually supportive (although, that description is predicated upon distinction). For example, children are often known by their Owambo names within the environs of the *egumbo* but by biblical or Western names in church (*omambo*) and school (*osikola*). Contextual discussions of local naming traditions (enacted in the homestead) alongside church baptism also draw attention to links made between particular settings, or spatial contexts, and autochthonous and Christian traditions. That is, naming rites (involving the giving of beads) take place in the homestead but the infant may then be taken to the church to undergo baptism (*omashasho*). Therefore, despite the suggestion that the institutions are mutually supportive, there is clear spatial demarcation. The traditional-*egumbo* association (versus a Christianity-church association) was echoed by the women’s group in our summary session at the end of my stay:

Meme Beata Mbinga:

Christianity and culture is brother and sister for example in naming. You give the name at home, but you bring the child to church to bless the name in baptism.

Author:

What would you do in the home for naming?

Memekulu Rauha Andreas:

In tradition, when you are naming the child for an unmarried couple, the father sends his representative to the house where the child is staying. They [the representative] take a container of *omalovu giilya* [traditional beer] and put *onyoka* [string of ostrich-shell beads] around the baby’s neck and say the name. And you send someone to tell the *ombushe* [namesake] that someone insulted or cursed them [i.e. their name is being used].

- Translator: You take the *onyoka* [beads] and the *onthikwa* [cloth baby-carrier] when you go to name the child. And why you say *ombushe* is insulted is mostly you will mention bad or unusual words to that child.
- Author: Overall, would you say that local culture and Christianity mostly mix, co-exist happily, or conflict?
- Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: The local culture and Christianity sometimes we put together, for example *ohango* [marriage]. Culture and Christianity are there. But sometimes they stand on their own leg.

Oomeme, Summary Session

So, concerning other matters, they are at odds, and the distinction the participants made between the worldviews (and associated practices, with associated spatial realms) becomes starker. Jesus cannot be an ancestor; he (and, on this point, Christianity itself) is incompatible with autochthonous worldviews about *aathithi*: with Palmer, 'Jesus does *not* fit "perfectly into the African understanding of ancestor"' (2008: 73, citing E. Milingo 1984: 78). Whilst this might be explained on the 'practical' level of ancestors being (by their very nature) locally-situated (requiring blood, clan, or land-based links to an African location), I also suggested that the historical context of missionary denigration of Owambo culture (and its potential internalisation by the community thereafter), may have had a part to play in generating aspects of resistance to inculturation hermeneutics. Further investigation is required to investigate whether there is indeed more at play here than merely the failure of the ancestor analogy at a grassroots level.

Conclusions

This study has illustrated some of the diverse ways in which African Traditional Religion endures in Owamboland and interacts with Christianity. Further, it provides a set of grassroots New Testament interpretations from an Ondonga community and demonstrates the ways in which they might dialogue productively with professional New Testament interpretations. Across both of those tasks, it has aligned itself with African Biblical Studies, demonstrating that ‘a genuine ABS is ... an amalgamation of multiple interpretive methods, approaches and foci that reflect a creative engagement of the African cosmological reality and the Bible’ (Mbuvi 2017: 149).

1 African Traditional Religion in Owamboland

The CCBIG discussions, especially those concerning healing and Ndonga weddings, demonstrate that bodies (including what they consume) index persistent elements of autochthonous worldviews and practices.¹ Chapter 4, for example, involved an exploration of connotations, agency and uses of blood; among the latter, it became clear that autochthonous healing practices were still in use – such as the use of blood from cuts (*oonsha*) made to the eyebrows or upper cheeks to salve eye pain – although there was no mention of blood-letting, which had been a treatment in the pre-Christian healing tradition. An exploration of enduring autochthonous perspectives on the body revealed that the somatic self is but one part of the ‘extended person’, with some believing that the individual was also present in their shadow, clothing, image and imprint (the latter influencing, for example, the relocation of the *ehale* [homestead entrance] upon the death of a household head). Overall, there were several references made to healing bodies using *oonganga* [diviner-healers], whose continuing significance was suggested in the ethnographic record by Koppe (1995), Isaak (1997), and de Jongh (1998). However, references to ‘fake’ *oonganga* and the duping of customers were suggestive of a decline in people’s confidence in traditional medicine. Nowadays, most rely on biomedical treatment, and it is with Christianity that many associated hospitals.

1 I have attempted throughout to demonstrate the diversity of responses returned during fieldwork in an effort to avoid homogenising the Iihongo residents. Nevertheless, certain themes deserve mention due to the fact that they would seem to be particularly prevalent and prominent in the worldviews and/or practices of the majority of the participants.

The body's vulnerability to spirits and witchcraft – evidence of which is considerable in ethnographic literature, reports of strangulation by *iiluli* (restless spirits), and in perceptions of disability and sickness today (for example, Uushona: Interview, 23.06.2015) – means that it is the body that is the site for the apotropaic materials (*omagwe*: beads) that might protect it (Chapter 4). It was also the body that proved to be the link between the physical and spiritual person: the corpse's location designated the 'home area' of the person post-mortem, whilst their continued existence in a restful or restless state was contingent upon satisfactory treatment of the corpse (including corpse-modification) (Chapter 5). The body has been a site of resistance and reclamation, too, with contemporary hybrid forms of clothing speaking to the pre-Christian past: whether in the form of today's 'traditional' women's dresses (*oohema dhoontulo*, Shigwedha 2006: 181–2), 'traditional' dance clothing (Haugh 2014: 202–5) and 'traditional' clothing at weddings (Chapter 3).

The wedding, a significant point in the life-cycle, was also one of the key rituals at which autochthonous worldviews and practices regarding the (feasting) body came to the fore (Chapter 3). There was the symbolic eating of *omakaka* (disks of wild spinach) by the groom, the necessity of certain figures having 'local chicken' to eat, the correct order for people to be served their food (food acting here as a status indicator) and the consumption of the slaughtered ox by the wedding guests. The perception was that there must be both 'traditional'



FIGURE 10 Wild spinach, boiled and dried in disks (*omakaka*) for storage

and 'modern' foods at the feast: *omakaka* (disks of spinach), *ondjuhwa* (chicken), *oshimbombo* (millet porridge), *omalovu giilya* (millet beer), and *onyama yongombe* (ox meat/beef) fulfil the requirement for the 'traditional', whilst bottled beer, bottled soft drinks, pasta and potato salads all point to the 'modern'.

Our discussions of the wedding – in particular, the spilling of the ox-blood – also led to the explanation of the relationship between animal bodies and human bodies (cattle and people), with cattle being used to 'pay' for the bride at the wedding. The slaughter of cattle as payment also arose in the context of remedying blood-guilt (*uutoni*), again in some way demonstrating equivalence between the value of an ox and the value of a human being (notably, enforceable by traditional authorities). The spilling of cattle blood into the land was perhaps suggestive of the continuing maintenance of ancestral ties, as the animals are 'a means to get in touch with the ancestors' (Aarni 1982: 63). There is also an interpersonal connection demonstrated by the division of the carcass into symbolic sections at the wedding, with predetermined cuts being set aside to give to persons of significance – the namesakes (*oombushe*), the 'second fathers' (*oohegona*). Whilst it is unclear whether or not these retain the meta-physical symbolism that they once did, it is safe to say that the division of the carcass serves as an indicator that autochthonous understandings of place – familial and intra-community relationships – still hold considerable sway.

It was with regard to the spirit complex, or community, that this study revealed very strong connections with autochthonous beliefs and practices. Understandings of this aspect influenced, both historically and contemporaneously, constructions of the individual's relation to the group – a person's place in the community. This study has illustrated quite clearly the contemporary prominence of belief in spirits, ancestors, and witches as part of people's lived experience in Iihongo (*iiluli*: named, restless, recently-deceased spirits; *aathithi*: unnamed, long-deceased ancestors; *aalodhi*: witches). These factors counter Hiltunen's claim that 'the belief in [witchcraft and sorcery] has vanished' (Hiltunen 1986: 157) and support Groop's (2010) findings that episodes of mass hysteria and collapse in school pupils could be explained by the presences of autochthonous spirits.

Contemporary practices accompany current beliefs in spirit beings, such as the wearing of amulets against witchcraft, symbolically closing the homestead against spirit penetration, advertising for and (potential) visits to diviner-healers (*oonganga*) or pouring libations to ancestors. *Oshimbombo* (porridge) used to be used to make offerings to the ancestors or the spirits of the east and west at first harvest. Whilst this particular practice was not reported in this study, to make offerings of comestibles has not entirely disappeared from contemporary Iihongo. Despite the ancestors falling into the category

autochthonous belief 'not compatible with Christianity' (Haugh 2014: 180), their significance endures, demonstrated through the making of (local beer) libations in order to traverse *aathithi* burial grounds without hindrance (Chapters 5 and 7). Further demonstration of the persistence of food-related beliefs in connection with spirits was the instruction not to pour drinks (or serve food) to others lest witchcraft be transmitted through those substances.

Via the landscape, the community would appear to extend beyond just its living members (an extended social landscape, just as would have been the case in pre-Christian times). The persistence of the autochthonous in this regard is further illustrated by the descriptions that participants gave of the nature of the physical landscape (Chapter 5). This I described as a *living landscape*, wishing to convey the extent to which spirits and ancestors were understood (as reported in the ethnographic literature) and continue to be understood as rooted, placed beings. Participants across the age-range recognised the notion of 'spirit groves' that ethnographic studies describe and could identify particular examples of possessed places. Furthermore, the spirit complex still extends into understandings of natural phenomena, with the identification of storms with spirit forces being prevalent (Chapter 6).

2 Biblical Interpretation, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion in Owamboland

Autochthonous understandings of landscapes also informed interpretations of the Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Chapter 3). The extent to which the contemporary *ohango* (wedding) is dependent upon one of its forerunners, the *ohango yokutselela* (wedding of the ox), became apparent (the church ceremony is, in terms of time, a distinctly brief part of the community celebration). The largely homestead-based festivities lasted over a week (from the announcement of the wedding and associated celebrations one weekend to the marriage ceremony and feasting the following weekend). There were also echoes the tradition of gift-giving by the groom to the bride (*iigondo*) and of the *ohango yiitsali* (wedding of the tents; the initiation rite) with the erection of the *etsali* (bush tent) at the homestead for special wedding guests.

Chapter 3 also considered models of table-fellowship in conjunction with the wedding banquet texts, the participants' interpretations of which had returned material readings. I suggested in this chapter that the feast aspect of the Matthean and Lukan narratives might be fruitfully developed (informed by the descriptions and experiences of Ndonga community-focused wedding celebrations), which would provide for a more comfortable fit in the open-commensality analogy.

Chapter 4 noted that historical-critical Western scholars have often highlighted the 'magical' aspects of Mark 5:21–43 and other Markan narratives, in part because of the way in which the haemorrhaging woman touches Jesus' cloak. However, the Iihongo interpretations suggested that blood, clothing and the shadow might be considered *part* of the person – here, I engaged with alternative anthropological constructs of personhood to illustrate the alternative paths of interpretation opened up by the CCBIG interpretations. This demonstrated that certain Western scholars' 'magical' designation may illustrate more about their own contextual location than is acknowledged. It was notable, too, that the Iihongo interpreters did not dwell on issues of purity; in this case, a context which has concerns with purity did necessitate purity interpretations.

Notions of the *living landscape* informed understandings of Legion's possession and the spaces he occupied, as well as highlighting the land as a neglected aspect in professional biblical scholarship (Chapter 5). Considering spirit beings to be, or to cause, natural phenomena influenced interpretations of the Markan 'nature miracles' and allowed me to support the case for interpreting the Calming of the Storm as an exorcism (Chapter 6). Both of the aforementioned chapters illustrated the extent to which mainstream Western scholarship is often unreflective about its own contextual setting, which has engendered a trend to relegate spirit-beings to the 'symbolic'. This contrasted with worldviews in Iihongo, within which spirits are part of the lived reality of the community.

In terms of post-mortem existence and interaction, *iiluli* (restless spirits) are reported to be very real and experienced in waking and dream states. They have often been described by participants as invisible and 'merely' spiritual, although visual and physical engagement has been noted. There is, I have suggested, a level of ambiguity in this area. *Aathithi* (restful, ancestral spirits), on the other hand, whilst widely known, are less frequently experienced. That the *aathithi* were both placed (in kin and clan, as well as in the landscape) and restful (never to return) had significant bearing for the Iihongo interpreters' understandings of how Jesus related to ancestors (Chapter 7). They rejected Ancestor Christology and, I would argue, notions of place were central to the fact that the metaphor failed to fit: the *aathithi* are necessarily local and they, as members of their Ndonga community, are buried in Ndonga land, from which they will not reemerge.

What links many of the above aspects together is the issue of language and translation. In terms of cosmology, it seems highly likely that the 'grafting' of the name of the remote and impersonal, indigenous *Kalunga* onto the immanent, personal, Christian God cannot have assisted in the divorce from autochthonous worldviews that the early missionaries sought. It may also

be that the appropriation of autochthonous terms for use in the vernacular Bible has contributed to the persistence of belief in witchcraft (*uulodhi*; for example, Numbers 23:23), ancestors (*aathithi*; for example, Deuteronomy 18:11), and restless spirits (*oshiluli*; for example, Luke 24:37), despite the vehemence of the missionaries that those elements ought to be eliminated. Likewise, the fact that the contemporary wedding is called an *ohango* suggests that it shares qualities with the pre-Christian *ohango*. The continued use of the word (the missionaries wished to eliminate the *ohango* *yiitsali* initiation but did not prevent the *ohango* *yokutselela* from continuing) actually enabled the maintenance of autochthonous practice and the symbolic world of the feast and rituals in the first place.

It is suggested that we understand our experience of the world through the language we use to describe it. Terminological appropriation, on this basis, will likely engender associated conceptual appropriation. In the Ondonga context, autochthonous, pre-Christian concepts remain influential in the shaping of contemporary Christian beliefs and practices (at least in part) because the former have been imported into Christian consciousness via terminological borrowings. The autochthonous informs the Christian, then, whether one is talking about language, worldview or practice. Completing the circle of influence, Christian terms, beliefs and practices have informed (and will continue to inform) perceptions and performances of Ndonga culture.

There were, of course, aspects of the worldviews and practices described in ethnographic literature that did not seem to have a place in Iihongo in 2014 and these were often expressly stated to have been determined by Christianity to be inappropriate (for example, abortion, initiation, wearing 'traditional' clothing in church, and keeping certain traditional drinks on church property). A complex combination of other factors would have aligned to determine Christianity's level of success in displacing autochthonous worldviews and practices. For example, the extent to which the missionaries approved or disapproved of each belief or practice affected its survival, as did the spatial sphere within which any given belief or practice was situated (was it operational, for example, in a sphere in which the missionaries/Church became involved?).

There was a sense amongst the participants that the homestead was more 'traditional' and that they paid more attention to Christian matters when physically at church services. Whilst this might seem obvious – one focuses on 'religious' things whilst in a religious service – it may also point towards the fact that mission and church buildings functioned, in the early days, as physical sanctuaries (the security the religion and their buildings provided is argued to be part of the original appeal of Christianity in the area [McKittrick

2002]). Meanwhile, the missionaries must have focused less on household and wild spaces, concerned as they were with teaching and learning at mission stations and, perhaps, enacting a Western conceptual dichotomy that exists between the 'religious' and 'secular' (more so, admittedly, in contemporary, increasingly secular, Western contexts). Autochthonous beliefs and practices, for their part, do not (a) separate religious and mundane aspects of life and, (b) have never been located in a physical building – there was/is no specific Ndonga or Owambo place of worship (Interview, Reverend Dr Shekutaamba V.V. Nambala, 23.06.2015).

However, it is important to note that differences in gender and age intersect with varying levels of Christian religiosity and result in heterogeneous understandings of the role of local culture. A woman's role as the primary manager of the homestead (the 'nucleus of traditional values' [Shigwedha 2006: 215]) will undoubtedly distinguish her experience of the interaction between Christianity and autochthonous worldviews and practices. A man's focus on his livestock and the landscape will influence his. The religiosity of either will influence their relative responses to issues of 'tradition'. Increased age may carry with it vestiges of the polarising attitudes of the missionaries to autochthonous worldviews and practices; certainly, the adults mentioned on several occasions that certain practices had been disallowed by the missionaries or 'the church' (abortion and *ohango yiitsali*, to name but two), and the women often seemed hesitant regarding the discussion of traditional matters when in bigger groups. This may speak to Brasche's claim that 'culture' is seen as 'strongly associated with past practices and activities' (2009: 267) and 'Ovamboness' is depicted by the Aawambo as the 'static' 'practices and beliefs which existed before the colonial encounter' (2009: 268, 45). Younger participants were often more vocal about sensitive topics (such as witchcraft), but sometimes had no knowledge of autochthonous understandings that older participants had mentioned (a person being accessible through their shadow). Their experience is undoubtedly affected by the Western-influenced education systems in which they are embedded. In sum, disunity of experience and opinion is to be expected and illustrates that there is no uniform cultural 'text' to which we might refer.

Perhaps the most unifying areas, however, were the landscape and the spirit community. In contemporary Iihongo, this provided the most obvious illustration of pre-Christian understandings being brought to bear on the contemporary Christian environment through the interpretation of New Testament texts. Community and landscape cannot be divorced from autochthonous notions of the living-and-dead community, together inhabiting a *living landscape*. This landscape, physical and spiritual, is the stage for the interaction

of autochthonous and Christian worldviews as has been demonstrated here through a series of contextual interpretations; the *autochthonous* (indigenous) has surfaced most clearly in consideration of matters *chthonic* (those of the spirit-inhabit land).

That any one of the above beliefs and practices was discussed in the CCBIG sessions does not necessarily mean that it was operational in contemporary Iihongo. Certainly, there may have been issues in translation: 'x was believed/practiced' could have been rendered 'x is believed/practiced'. Additionally, it was sometimes unclear to me whether we were discussing events contributors had experienced themselves or had heard reported. At least sometimes, though, definitive testimony was given that autochthonous beliefs *and* practices endured to the present day. Given the uncertainty, when any given belief or practice is mentioned, the very least that can be ascertained is that it is a feature of current consciousness, whether reflectively reviewed as past belief/practice, passed on in oral testimony and then related in discussion, or a feature of contemporary belief/practice.

The participants in Iihongo felt the significance of 'culture' (*omuthiguluwakalo*) keenly, just as they did that of Christianity (*uukristi*). Nürnberger's rather generalising argument certainly applies to this context: 'the basic assumptions of the original African view of reality are not left behind when people convert to Christianity' (2007: 16). What was quite notable, however, was that a conceptual division has been maintained between what is 'cultural' and what is 'Christian'. Participants may have seen the systems as parallel or mutually supportive ('like brother and sister') but they were nonetheless differentiated. That an individual might have two names (*Oshindonga* and Christian/Western) or sleep (or dress, or address natural phenomena, and so on) 'in culture' rather than 'in Christianity' makes clear the distinction between the autochthonous realm and the Christian realm. There are, therefore, multiple ways in which the Ndonga and Christian worldviews and practices relate: distinction, parallelism, interpenetration, and hybridity. The socio-cultural and religious landscape is, above all, dynamic.

To conduct a study in such a dynamic environment, and in a context in which one is an outsider, is not without its challenges. My focus here has been to create dialogue, in the service of enriched and reflexive biblical interpretation, and within a framework of sensitive and in-depth anthropological engagement. It is a considerable concern, nonetheless, that an African biblical interpretation project, conducted by a white European, might be deemed inappropriate. This sense is only enhanced when one considers the entanglement of colonialism with Christianity and the Bible (Mbuvi 2017: 158), and the

observation that biblical studies itself is 'a neo-colonial import into Africa' (West 2018: 247). This study, perhaps illustrating a Eurocentric (or an atheistic, socio-historical?) bent, does fall foul of 'western biblical studies' proclivity to historical analysis of the text' and it cannot claim to have privileged the 'concerns of the here and now', toward which African scholars themselves might aim (Mbuvi 2017: 168).

However, and upholding the values of ABS, it has sought to cross boundaries and to foreground and privilege 'African worldviews in interpretation of the Bible' (Mbuvi 2017: 150), here making the Owambo context and Iihongo interpreters the 'subject of interpretation' (West 2018: 254). It has attempted to 'introduce new perspectives' (Mbuvi 2017: 168), which interrogate, challenge, disrupt or nuance Eurocentric interpretations. It has engaged in the struggle not to allow 'Euro-American biblical scholars to have the final word' (West 2018: 254). Those Euro-American scholars, Dube suggests, would be adrift without Eurocentric approaches to biblical interpretation:

Take these Eurocentric paradigms away, biblical scholars will not know what to do. Give biblical scholars a reading from Other worldviews, they dismiss it as un-scholarly. Myopia reigns!

DUBE 2012: 18

Perhaps it is in the *encounter* that such short-sightedness might be treated. Certainly, my interpretative 'eyesight' has been sharpened and my education enriched through encounters with 'other ways and places of reading' (Dube 2012: 18). In some small way, then, I hope that this study both serves the de-centering agenda and contributes to what could and should be a productive conversation between African and Western biblical scholarship, rather than continued myopia.

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